

Zemlya
by
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PROSTHETICS

“So, where do we go from here?”

Lucinda gazed into the eyes, or rather each eye, of Eisgn, while the sun poured green light upon them, he opposite her, she sitting here in this chair so like a black spider, its legs wrapped sinuously about themselves.

And every few moments she felt the chair breathing, subtle soft legs vibrating, barely perceptible, except now she knew.

And Eisgn knew she knew.

They had met twelve days earlier. Lucinda, her dark hair a contrast to the pale almost-white of the people here had been sent as a rudimentary ambassador, the first tenuous step toward formal relations. And the native inhabitants, especially Eisgn, had done all they could to make her welcome.

The city? Why, it seemed so oddly terrestrial. The streets seemed paved, each stone smoothed, and had she realized sooner would have recognized the streets as being ones she had already seen when she was three and her parents had taken her to some now lost remnant of a place that didn't exist.

The food? She gazed at the table and its rounded perfection matched perfectly with a table she had seen her grandmother use, once, just once, when she was five and her grandmother, seemingly eternal, had stooped down to her and offered her a candy. Now that same candy was positioned in a bowl the colour of malachite.

She reached for one and let it slide delicately against her tongue. The people here called this a cultural delicacy. But of course, this “cultural delicacy” hadn't existed until twelve days ago.

The people? They seemed humanoid, approximately her size. She stood 5'4 and until now she'd never noticed that no one on the streets exceeded that height. Her height. An entire

population was tailored after one person, one stranger who had never been here before.

Eisgn took candy from the bowl, let it roll between his fingers, and for a moment she marvelled at the action. Each finger, each finger joint copied perfectly how a human would do it as if the joints could only function like a human hand.

But this wasn't true.

Eisgn? He had met her, shown her the city, showed her the outlying plains and hills beyond. What was it? What memory had they used? A past lover? An older friend her older sister knew?

Perhaps she had never consciously been aware of her feelings but they had been aware. She stared at him a moment.

Where her features were slightly angular, her hands slender, her body little more than a hundred and twenty pounds the being sitting before her was slightly larger, not taller, but somehow he exuded a presence as if some giant were sitting before her.

In a sense there was.

His clothing rustled a moment, greyish clothes which they assured her could be manufactured and sent back to Earth. They assured her, the "Ministers of Commerce," that the cloth was easy to create. She smiled wryly now. Of course, it was easy to create.

His clothing rustled but there was no wind. There was never any wind. In twelve days, she hadn't felt a breeze. Perhaps that was when she'd first realized her error, the subtle falseness of the place.

No wind.

And the sun, how greenly it gleamed, tinting everything. Except. The candy wasn't green. The clothing . . . was that it? Her memories, did they affect the illusion enough that even the sun's light couldn't touch them? Was that why at odd intervals the green roads became grey or white, the lost roads of her childhood peering out like centipedes from under the canopy of the illusion?

But before her realization there had been twelve days, eight of them in the intimate company of . . . him? Her? Them?

"So, where do we go from here?"

"What do you want from us?" Eisgn asked. It was not an accusation. There was a strangely muted quality to his voice now, a neutral tone that contrasted with the affable bass of his voice from before, from memories of whatever real or illusionary lover she had imagined before.

Lucinda put her chin in her left hand and stared at him, them, for a moment.

"Did we frighten you this much?" she asked finally.

The chair shuddered a moment and then grew very still.

The candy, the small rounded object dropped from his fingers. Ah. He, they, were having a hard time keeping it all together. She had first realized the full extent of the deception yesterday. Yes, there was no wind and the roads shifted colour but the full extent of the deception occurred when last night she had gazed up, absently with thoughts of home and suddenly there it was in the night's sky.

The constellation of Orion, viewed from a world a hundred light-years from Earth, at such an angle to make the constellation an impossibility. All this, all this was a lie. So rather than share Eisgn's bed she had wandered the streets instead, arriving at this café, copy of some other memory perhaps, and here he had come and sat, watching her. It would have been impossible for her to avoid him. His eyes were watching her everywhere.

"You could have told me the truth," she said finally.

"We. . .," He stopped.

"And why all this? If we terrify you why show me all this beauty? Surely that would draw attention, and I'd want to stay?" She stared at him quizzically a moment and then grew still.

"You are . . .," he paused, and then she realized he wasn't

pausing. They were trying to work out the right words and all of them coalesced to a single point. "You are . . . the first ones we've encountered."

Ah. A world the size of the Earth composed of who knows many components, a world of giga-trillions perhaps? Each stone, each blade of grass part of a parliament of being.

And still, they were lonely.

"Why don't you drop the disguise and we can say greet each other properly?"

"What about. . .?"

"About us? Been on fourteen planets now. Met species, well, I imagine you know the kinds of beings we've found. You've seen them," she tapped her head a moment with a finger, "here." She reached out a hand. "If this is the end I'd like to at least know your face."

He reached out with trembling fingers and took her hand in his, then she watched as the hand gave way. Sinews relaxed and suddenly his hand was in hers while his wrist slid back. She stared at it a moment, clinically, watching as the fingers detached, each one falling to the table like small worms, each slowly shifting to a rhythm.

The forearm also detached, and clothing dissolved to the ground and pooled like small snakes. Forearm crawled backward away from her and she stared up at his face as first his nose, then his upper palette crawled sideways and dropped to the ground.

The cavity of his face widened as his eyes pulled themselves from the sockets and one of them used long threads to adhere to the wall while the other returned to the socket.

His right eye. Their right eye.

Of course, she realized "he" too was little more than a prosthetic as the streets slowly breathed and the chair shuddered again, and looking at the back of it noticed a small row of serrated teeth at the top as the table on spindling legs moved sideways into

the road.

And in all this, she never batted an eye.

When it was over, when streets and windows stopped breathing, when Eisgn had been reduced to its parts, each piece as sentient as herself, when the world stopped building the vast illusion of her past, this woman, the proxy of people and places so far removed as to be in another reality from this one, stopped, gazed at the hollowed wreck of the being she had loved, and then smiled.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said.

GHOSTS OF THE AMMONITES

"I know there are things older than death."

Roderigo Fontoyl was standing amid the plush rooms of the old brownstone talking to his selected admirers. Most of them were old widows, necks suffused of pearls and jewels that sparkled so unlike their eyes, wearing black lace in memory of husbands, most of whom deserved little remembrance and even less pity.

But in their mind's eye, their husbands were dashing heroes, valiant and brave, who never had affairs, never raped, never killed, never swore or spat or did anything especially bad, and nothing deserving of death. Even the soldiers fighting for king and country. Especially those soldiers.

"I would speak of the city of the thousand pillars where the whispering darkness is often heard, where the ghosts of the past beckon. I would speak of the mad prophet who learned what those before death know, and I would reveal his wisdom to you."

Roderigo was a tall, dashing man in his late fifties pretending to be thirty-five. His hair was slicked back and black, his suit pressed perfectly, his hands in white gloves, his body tense as if summoning the spirits of the dead.

Of course, though he *was* in his late fifties, he made up the city of pillars, had no great words of wisdom, and hadn't yet relieved himself of the wine he had drunk earlier in the night. Still, after a long ramble about the immortality of the soul, after explaining to the women gathered about the oak round table, its legs curling like strange vines to the ground, amid bookcases filled of books he'd never read and a globe showing countries meant to be destroyed in thirty years during the Great War, he would pick out two or three, pretend to channel their dead husbands, have sex, say goodnight, then do the whole spiel next week.

He was a very matter-of-fact prophet. He didn't ask for much money, the women he suspected guessed he was making a lot of things up, he didn't believe his own words and he didn't say anything beyond that men were good, these women good in bed, and he proved life was vast and varied and fear of the beyond superfluous.

So, when the dawn came and he turned to see Mary, her white hair trailing along his right shoulder, and Catherine, her white hair trailing along his left shoulder, he was mildly surprised to notice movement on the far table.

He carefully rose, resting the pair of them closer together, (as if that hadn't happened before,) and moved toward the movement on the dresser by the far wall. He absently noticed the window to his left was letting in shafts of light, noticed the dreadful wallpaper, a deep blue streaked of ugly white flowers, and noticed his gloves by this movement.

He noticed all this because this wasn't his bedroom and in his line of work remembering any detail could save his life. Especially since Mary's son lived here and might not take too kindly to the man psychically impersonating his father, and most likely someone else's father, at the same time.

The movement was like leaves swaying and when he came to the object, he didn't know what he saw. It was like a snail's shell but much larger, about the size of his hand, coloured like dried coral. Small vines or lengths of wires were whipping about the aperture at the end of it and he realized they were tentacles. Then the beast's eyes and lower body emerged. It was like a nautilus he realized, but then recalled his science. No, not a nautilus.

This was an ammonite.

He had seen fossils of them and now there was one lying on his dresser and he picked it up, only for his hand to come clean

through it. He started, stared, mentioned to the girls to wake up and when they did, they saw it too.

“Astonishing,” Mary said.

“Fantastic,” Catherine replied.

“Unusual,” Roderigo said, and sat on the bed and wondered what to do. The ammonite wouldn’t move. But it was lying on the table so he went to the dresser and moved it. The ammonite stayed where it was. It didn’t move with the table but was stationary.

“I don’t think it likes what you’re doing Rody,” Mary said. The small creature was whipping its tentacles furiously at him.

“Yes, quite right, quite right.” Of course, he could take a picture of it. Yes, he summoned Catherine, and minutes later she brought up the bulky thing. He put it on the tripod, placed it as close as possible, and took the picture.

And the image was there. He could see it when he took it, and later, when it was developed the small creature was plainly visible. But for now, at this moment there was a creature of prehistory lying on the dresser, whipping at nothing and he didn’t know what to do about it.

And then it chose for him. It lifted itself with an alien sound and vacated the room, passing straight through the wall toward the sun. He watched it float away in wonder.

“Well,” he said to himself, “this is going to be an extraordinary day.”

He walked the streets after that. Mary and Catherine wanted some alone time and Mary’s son wasn’t due home for another two days so they were safe. He walked down the grimy streets of a London as familiar as his own hand, passing various vendors, a few prostitutes on their way home, and a giant sloth.

It was straddling the middle of the street, standing upright, easily thirty feet. His mouth dropped open. Carriages to either

side of it had stopped. The police were baffled. The sloth was peering into a second-floor window and its claws passed harmlessly through the wall. A woman screamed inside.

She had obviously seen it too.

He marvelled at it. Thirty feet, its grey fur shimmering in the heat, its muzzled face as large as a bear's, no, larger. And he saw the claws, each one long as a hand, and standing upright it seemed less an animal and more a god.

Then it crashed on its four feet and walked through the carriages, its occupants screaming in terror. It passed by him, then stopped, sniffed at him, then walked on. He fell backwards to the street as it wandered past, his mind reeling.

Should he follow it? The beast answered for him when it passed through the street to the earth below. He turned to the carriages and the general terror of the occupants. The police were as stunned as the passengers. More so. Some couldn't move.

He steadied himself. Hallucination perhaps, but, but then a mutual hallucination among total strangers? No. He rose, dusted himself off, tried to pretend he wasn't afraid, and continued on as the sun kept getting higher in the summer sky.

He had almost reached home when the saber-tooth tiger greeted him. He was within twenty feet of his door, his white, safe, bland little door when the beast strolled casually from the park across the street.

It was striped black and orange, its twin teeth sharp and serrated and long, oh *God* they were long, and it was eyeing him. Only him. It crouched and he realized something horrifying. It had a raven in its mouth. It had a raven in its mouth and its feet were crunching the grass and he *heard* the grass crumple neath the massive feet. And it was on him, running as fast as possible and he ran to the door, fumbled at the lock, opened it, closed it, and a massive splintering sound was heard.

It clawed at the door, then the sound faded and he slid

bodily to the ground, only to hear the splintering once more and then the sound of massive pads strolling on.

Followed by a woman's scream.

It was happening all over. In Africa, ancient sauropods were on the march. Creatures the size of city blocks with legs six times the width of oaks were rumbling the earth with their footfalls, sometimes passing clean through, but other times destroying everything in their wake.

Megalodons were seen in the oceans, sharks twice the size of the largest whale, their teeth as big as human hands, serrated and fierce, teeth which cut through the steel hulls of ships like paper and a knife.

Ammonites were flying in the sky in their millions, then crashing to the sea, then rising again. Not only ammonites through. All manner of ancient creatures were flying which could not have in life.

Giant spiders, snakes a hundred feet long, and lizard gods straddling forty feet end to end were seen amid the clouds, only to dart earthward, pick up a victim (only sometimes human,) and then fly off again.

But the worst was yet to come.

The plague hit. People began to die, of everything. Cough, Black Death, types of cancer sprouting outward like fungi. No one had seen anything like it but Roderigo understood that not all old creatures could be seen.

There amid the air were microbes, dead and long buried bacteria and viruses passing clean thru sky, through walls, through windows and across oceans and thru time herself.

And not only them.

How many cancers had claimed a life, how many tumors, how many forgotten pieces of misfiring flesh had killed? Now

they too were returning, passing, and haunting the descendants of the ones they had first killed.

All the ghosts were returning without thought to species or time or place. On the final day humanity had left Roderigo opened his door, walked outside, and was greeted by the most astonishing, fantastic, unusual sight he'd ever imagined.

A great *thing* was in the street, fifty feet tall, composed of three legs leading to a rounded body and a single eye at the top. It peered at him and knew he was to die, then realized in his despair this was no terrestrial thing.

This was a ghost of another world, Mars, Venus, perhaps a world no human eye had ever seen.

And he turned, for he did not want to see the final blow, turned upon the faces, bodies, and forms of creatures unimaginable, creatures so fantastic and terrible and wonderful he had no words to describe them, as the final blow fell.

THE CITY IN THE ATTIC

There is a house on Pradling Cross Lane the colour of shale and dried-out coral, like autumn leaves washed into dull shadings of themselves. It has been the property of fifteen different individuals or groups in the last decade, and the fate of each has been the same.

Some were families, small children playing in the grassy knolls of the front yard, playing behind the stone fence, and then, just as their laughter echoed the strongest their small bodies and smiling small faces were gone.

Some were old men bent forward from wars in other lands, their hands gnarled, coming to their retirement here, they who sat and read in the ancient library left by whoever the original owner had been, then they too would fade out. And none would know where they went. There was a depressing familiarity to their vanishing, children and old men, lovers and scholars and poets.

Now it was Ecagleoni's turn.

Pietro Ecagleoni was a newly arrived immigrant from Italy. Tall and broad-shouldered, his bald head sweating in the sun, he had come to Pradling Cross Lane to work on a collection of fables from his homeland.

He had acquired the house, made all arrangements, and stood before the ancient doors, oaken and sere he smiled and entered, noticing beforehand that the houses to either side were far away, like sentinels about to watch some ancient, dark ritual.

He had chosen this place though he could not say why. It had seemed to beckon him, and here, standing in the foyer, looking at the stairs spiralling upward to his bedroom, the hall leading to the library, all thoughts turned to the beauty of the space, the ornate panelling, the sheer awe of this shrouded dominion, as if he were following the footsteps of a great

multitude.

He set to work immediately. He went to the library and pen in hand sat at the desk worn smooth of centuries and got to work. As he wrote he idly wondered at the man who showed him the house. The man had almost stumbled backward upon entering. His eyes darted about and he seemed concerned.

But simultaneously he had seemed certain Ecagleoni would take the home. In fact, without thinking Ecagleoni had agreed to everything, the man had smiled, and looking back once, went on his way, sadly.

Why sadly? He paused a moment and thought about that. Yes, staring through the lens of the past the man had sadly gone on his way, his ruffled overcoat hanging about him, his feet shuffling along the cobblestones, his very presence grief-soaked, and yet Pietro couldn't say why.

Of course, he knew about the others, or suspected. Old houses always have legends attached to them, headless ghosts, phantom horses, black dogs with fiery eyes, and there had been whisperings of people who vanished, yet none of these details bothered Ecagleoni in the slightest

He continued his work, pen in hand and the sun began to set. He went over the ancient fables, the old stories, and the mythologies of his homeland. Of course, it was hardly just his homeland.

Italy as he knew it was but a shadow of an older age, a more forgotten time. The Lamia, the gods of the Etruscans, the Strigoni; these beings had roots older than his country's name.

He stretched and climbed the stairs to sleep.

His room had been prepared. A four-poster bed the colour of dung, a dresser across from it, a mirror showing the room in reverse, and a window leading out to moonbeams and silver, for the moon was full that night.

He undressed, climbed to bed, and tried to sleep. But sleep

eluded him. He tossed and turned and then sat bolt upright and saw himself do likewise in the glass. There was a sound. He had heard that sound, knew it intimately, for he had heard it his entire life. But it was utterly impossible here.

It was the sound of people talking. There was no truly audible or discernable rhythm. To the untrained, it sounded like a small din but he knew it for he lived in a great city and the throngs of people, whatever their language made such a noise, such sheer cacophony. But it was impossible.

He was miles from any city and the distinctive sound was not coming from below but from above. He looked up and noticed a small crack in the ceiling. For a vague, terrible moment he imagined all the previous tenants up there, talking and reminiscing like ghosts do in the stories but he dismissed the thought, drew a candle from the dresser by the bed, lit it, and exited his room.

He noticed the second staircase and following upward came to a trapdoor, and opening the trapdoor came to a small room. There was a door in this room, a room barely large enough for a man to stand upright in, and opening it was another, larger room.

The window shone in the moonlight and upon the room was a circular design. For a moment he imagined someone had drawn this circular pattern and was about to step forward onto it for a better look when he paused.

It was not drawn. It had been built. He narrowed himself to the floor and carefully looked at the design. They were walls. They had been built up barely higher than half a millimeter but he could see it, somehow. Perhaps seeing was the wrong word. He sensed they were walls. So, he knew.

Within the walls were buildings and walking among the buildings were people. No, no, not people, but something. He had the vaguest notion of insect-lizard things, owl-eye, sharp-teethed

resting along fingertips but this was only the closest his mind could come to what they were.

They spoke and talked, and in the moon's light, he sensed them, peered down into their lives, and knew somehow they were looking up, as if he were a new moon or a foreign planet, idly aware of him, indifferently.

He noticed one climb the stairs of a building though he could not possibly know she was climbing, nor could he possibly know the gender of the small creature. Yet he did. She stood on the rooftop and her fingertips glistened of teeth, all sixteen fingers on her scarlet-touched hands and her eyes stared through him and he imagined himself as she saw him, yes, like a planet newly discovered, some world whose orbit had careened along their path.

He staggered backwards as she named him, M'gokirkodir, though this was the closest he could come to the words she used in describing him. He slid to the back wall trying to understand but her words caught wickedly in his throat and he tried to imagine what they were, but words failed him.

And then it was day and he awoke in that same room, staring at the same circular pattern and knowing it was no dream he fled down the stairs, not to his bedroom, but to the library.

He scoured the books that day, looking for clues. He had not imagined any of it. He still saw her feathered head, her long slender jaw, the tendrils that grew from off her like cancerous vines, teeth along her fingers, the black and scarlet eyes.

No, she was real, they were real, and he needed answers. So, he did what any scholar who studied the old myths would do; he read. He found what he was looking for in an ancient diary, for he found the words she had used, and more.

"M'gokirkodir M'gohiro M'gosdirodir.

"These the words of the spell, these the words they gave to me. I encountered these strange beings long after the house was built. My wife Sarah complained of strange noises in the night, I went, I investigated, and I found the city there.

"I saw the creatures, and almost attempted to destroy them but their words held me back. I saw them as they see me; I know not where they come from but I will not venture into the attic again.

"My wife believes me strange or mad and she is vowing to go up to see herself. I will not stop her but I will not stay. I have heard the words of their priestess and whatever the words mean I will not go there again. This is no longer my home. It belongs to them."

The entry ended. The man was named Abner Craik. Pietro left the house and journeyed to the town to see what happened to Mr. Craik. He went to the town records and learned a fuller picture of the history of his new home.

Abner Craik had indeed left. Sarah was never seen again. Craik vowed never to return to the home and of all the individuals he was the only one to escape with his life. The list of those who disappeared staggered him. Craik had left but none of the others had. Sarah was but the first. He had suspected a haunted house but the sheer number of the disappeared, families and old men, scholars, poets and lovers, staggered him.

And the town kept on going without them. Oh, no one who lived in the town would venture in; this explained the man who sold the property, but the house was never condemned nor destroyed. No children vandalized the place, nor was even a window broken. He idly asked the records keeper, a tall, stern woman about the house but she shrugged and left him amid the stacks and shelves, as if to say it was no business of hers.

He sat and thought for a moment in the grey silence of the records office. On the one hand, he knew what he had seen. A city, a race of creatures he could not explain, and the words, the first

words in the diary were the same as he had heard uttered.

Families and old men, scholars, poets, lovers, and children, gone. But how? The city obviously, but how? Had they been taken, shrunk, and devoured? Perhaps merely shrunk? Perhaps merely devoured? Maybe the creatures could leave the confines of the city, slink like a swarm down through the cracks in the ceiling, and feast upon him.

Well, if that was true why hadn't they? Or why had they allowed him to leave? For he had left, he had walked out past the doors and he was out, unless he had never left unless at this moment he was dreaming, his body cocooned and being consumed; perhaps the spell had taken effect and he was immobile and his body swarmed of them?

No. Even if this was his fate he would have to assume it was not until proven otherwise. He was a collector of fables and myths and here was a myth, a fable, some primordial force of nature masquerading as something impossible.

He idly wondered at what his fate would bring. He knew how most stories ended of things beyond the human ken. He had the proof in his hand of the number of the dead and knowing the odds did not suspect his life would be longer.

Yet he had escaped. Here he was outside and all he had to do was leave, just as Craik had done. All he needed was to leave. Yet he had something none of the others had. He needed to understand. Here indeed was a myth, some impossible thing, and he had spent the better part of his life in the collecting of creatures who could not be, the subtle origins of thought, for fables often spoke of truths too hard for human beings to otherwise understand.

So, he turned back, returning to the house. But not before he had placed all he knew in a letter and mailed it to a friend of his. He was reckless and he knew it. But he was not foolish.

He had studied the documents and knew that some dwelled in the house for months and others days before they disappeared. He knew that the city was the centre of the mystery, those tiny beings there within, and yet so much eluded him as yet.

Across the mist-shrouded ground, the house had been built and the creatures had come but they had come after, as if drawn to something. The owners had vanished and yet if his fate was theirs surely he should have been taken and yet he had escaped. Perhaps the spell had been incomplete? Perhaps he had slumbered as the incantation was placed over him? He ascended the stairs, determined to add this impossibility to his collection.

He came to the trapdoor and opened it, entered the room with the sun shining and there was the city circular and there were the beings in it, and he bent and looked to them. They slithered upon the ground, small and microbic and microscopic, and yet he knew them. Yes, that was it. He knew them somehow.

He stared at them in the light and the city seemed familiar and pen and paper in hand he wrote of all he saw. Yes, there was the centre of the city, the halls silver as moonstone, and over there were avenues of coral and the city had a look of dried autumn leaves burnt out and obliterated of themselves . . . he rose and turned and went down the stairs.

He walked outside and went down the road and didn't stop until he came to a map of the city he was living in. He took the map off the wall and gazed at it, even as the man complained, then returned it to the post office wall as the customers regarded him coolly and the man seemed upset with the taking of his property, but Ecagleoni didn't notice or didn't care.

He returned to his house and stared at the map. At both of them. So, there was the trap he thought to himself. This was why only outsiders took the house. He climbed the stairs and returned to the sun-stained room and the small priestess was there, stern and tall and he realized she looked, despite her strangeness,

somehow like the woman at the records office.

Even with all the alienness about her, the small slithering insect-lizard reminded him of the woman at the records office. They all did. A miniature copy of the outside city, a reflection distorted into this shape, and whether he moved outside or stayed here he was already there, somehow, already in the city in the attic.

Perhaps Abner had escaped merely in his own mind. Perhaps he or a portion of him lay still in the city and never got out. And he looked down to where the house, his house was, and there were tiny families and scholars and poets and lovers all gathered together for the house was exceedingly large and he saw himself as he was in that other world, just as they were reflections of the past, reflected as some small scarlet insect-lizard there in their midst, amid uncounted centuries.

He seemed to have become a thing of myth.

And he very gingerly reached in and pulled the small copy of himself up out of the city, as some great trans-dimensional force likewise pulled him up and he vanished into some other realm beyond the conceiving even of the gods themselves.

And then he stood, knowing that now he was not looking down at the city but upward to eternity and infinity as he placed the small creature that he was in his breast pocket and walked down the stairs and out the door, still writing everything he knew, still recording his experiences from beyond the pale of reality and didn't stop, not once until he was outside the city limits, and noticed in his pocket that the small creature that he was, was dead.

Then he turned, looked at the city once more, and went on his way, making certain he was not followed. Though no one followed him from either place he occupied his flesh, as he fled.

POCKET UNIVERSES

Mr. Cascasil had had a bad day. Perhaps it was the job or the daily grind or the wife or the kids but he didn't really know. He rose and the room he called his own was the same and if in idle moments he imagined his past he imagined the same room and the same day, even as a child.

However, he suspected he had never been a child and that it had all been a lie and the only time was right now and all he was he was meant to be in this moment, stretching on and on, talking to people he despised in a job he couldn't remember, though he tried to remember bitterly.

And there was his wife, all summer in a storm and why had he married her anyway? He wasn't really sure. Oh, he knew the moment of their first meeting, there with his friends in that spacious place and he was unsure and she uncertain and they had found common ground in their insecurities and uncertainties, talking about inane things like the weather, and later they had tried sex, awkward and difficult, but later then that, with no one else about to prove their worth, only each other, they wed.

And that was that.

His house was a small one he knew, and he felt the clutching of his heart each time after work when he entered it. And his wife, why how large was she in his memories? He imagined if all thoughts of her were cut from him he'd barely feel anything at all.

But what of his son?

His son, too small and weak, mewling, and she'd come to him and he recalled when he was small and no one seemed there to comfort him and there was a tinge of jealousy in her every step toward him, his son, not him, and one day he watched his young boy playing near a wasp nest and hadn't bothered to tell his son what they were but rather encouraged the small boy to pick at the

shimmering jewels of black and yellow.

Oh, he cried and she came and he turned from the front door and went inside and never bothered once to look back. It didn't seem fair somehow; she never really seemed so focused on him.

And there was recrimination and asking how he could not have seen the wasps or heard the cries but Mr. Cascasil just shrugged and said he had to go to work and if she didn't mind it wasn't as if their son had died. And he walked out the door.

As he crossed the street passing white houses lined in rows like matchbooks about to burn, as he passed thin-fingered trees he noticed a shop positioned comfortably between two grocery stores. It seemed so incongruous, so out of place, a little Oriental facade snug between two faceless window-lit depots.

And without quite knowing why he entered it and there was the counter and the man standing behind it to Cascasil's left and the shop was dark and littered with seemingly every possible thing.

Books, yes, all manner of books and the titles eluded him as if the languages he didn't know. And the objects, some of glass or stone but carved into vaguely lusting shapes as if each thing was reaching for him alone.

"Ah Mr. Cascasil, you're right on time," the man said and rose. Mr. Cascasil focused on the man now. He was skeletally thin and tall with a mane of hair a colour not seen before, nor what colour those eyes were. The hands were thin and long and the man grinned and his smile extended ear to ear, and beyond somehow.

"How do you know my name?" he asked.

"Because I've seen you come here before of course. And I always answer so and therefore I know this must be your name. Now, let's see, let's see, you always go toward the row where the

jewels are first," he indicated the farther end, where a collection of perfectly spherical crystals were, "and you always then say . . ."

He looked up to Mr. Cascasil imploringly.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Ah! There it is! 'What the hell is going on?' I love that! It truly never gets old." He motioned toward the farther row. "Now, you walk thus," Mr. Cascasil stepped forward, "you take this sphere," the sphere seemed to pass from the far wooden shelf to Mr. Cascasil's hands though he didn't know how it did so, "you then say?" He added expectantly.

"I'm leaving?" Mr. Cascasil said uncertainly.

"I'm leaving!" I love it. And then you go out the doors and go to work. You will be exactly 2 minutes, and 14 seconds late. Have a nice day."

And the man turned away as if Mr. Cascasil wasn't there and yet before he could say anything else he walked out the door, not certain why, and went to work.

And he was exactly 2 minutes and 14 seconds late.

All through the day the small rounded crystal upset him. He hadn't noticed it properly in the shop but now he could see it was not crystal but more like obsidian. It was completely black and roughly the size of a baseball. Except it wasn't. Periodically his boss would come in and suddenly the ball would become as small as a marble while at other times it expanded to the size of a skull. He couldn't understand it.

The day passed quickly and there was yet again nothing to show for it. He tried to envision his place of work, the long tables, the desk, his chair but it all faded out the moment he left and even the faces of his boss and his coworkers seemed vaguely indistinct.

He went home.

At home he passed the picket fence and opened the door and he felt the solid weight of the white door in his hand and

suddenly everything came into sharp relief. He remembered distinctly everything, his boss with her blond hair and grim smile and green eyes and his coworkers. He had known them for years but only in that moment did he imagine them as something else, something other than the vague nothings he thought they were.

He opened the door and his wife was there and suddenly her smile lighted the room, her mouth became ten miles long in his mind and he studied each tooth like it was its own continent.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Good," he said, sat at the table, bare and brown and his fingers brushed against the smooth finish and suddenly he could recall each individual part of it, each grain, and for the briefest moment he saw backward, the tree being born and cut down and he thought he almost heard a scream. He shook his head and said nothing. He didn't know what to say.

They ate in silence and later they had sex and it was bizarre to suddenly feel her weight upon his body and each thrust seemed slowed to some motion like a sea lapping at the shore and he was standing on the beach he thought while the sweat cooled on their bodies afterward. But that couldn't be. Then he remembered that exactly a year before he had stood on the beach. The same beach he saw for a moment in his mind's eye.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"How good that was," he lied.

They slept.

The sphere was the object of his thoughts. At the table, after midnight he sat and watched it. It was pure obsidian and it had shrunk to the size of a marble now and he was looking at it. Three hours after they had made love he rose and came down to the kitchen and with the sink behind him and the window to his left everything seemed so utterly normal, and yet the sphere beckoned him.

Then he noticed the small bit of light. There on the skin of the obsidian was a light and it was getting bigger. Then he saw other shimmering bursts of fire, and he fell forward. Suddenly he saw them for what they were. Stars. They were billions of stars and his mouth was agape and he was moving forward toward one of those points of light and suddenly he saw an onrush of worlds he had not recognized and he was no longer sitting in his kitchen.

The sun was bright red and the land was parched and purple and strange creatures crawled, riddled with spines, armoured wormlike beasts with mouths of a thousand needle-sharp teeth and they were coming toward him. Hungrily.

He saw hills to the distance but it was too far to run and suddenly he was carried up and passed to another world of winged beasts with brittle bones, the land riddled with crystalline strands like a labyrinth up in the middle of the air and the pale translucent beasts with their beaks sped to him and he saw for a moment himself about to be cut by them, then the cut came and he was pulled again, upward and outward to yet another place.

He was pulled and dragged and the worlds shifted so rapidly that he couldn't keep track of it all. Yet sometimes after he fled away, he noticed a detail he hadn't before, as if he was still there, waiting amid the despair and ecstasy of the moment that was.

Then the lights came on and his wife was standing looking at him and he jerked up and smiled weakly and she stared at him strangely.

"It's morning," she said.

"Yes." He looked to the sphere.

"Oh, dear, your arm's been cut. And you've been bruised. What happened?"

He thought a moment.

"I don't know," he said. "I can't say."

He showered and dressed and she made breakfast, and his son sat and watched the sphere and mentioned to his mother how strange it looked and she smiled, patted his head, and told him to go play. Which he obediently did. He ate quietly, took the sphere with him, and went to work.

But Mr. Cascasil had to go somewhere else first.

And so, he came to the shop again and the man at the counter looked to be waiting for him.

"My, my, you are so punctual," the man said. "Of course, you always are but still it's nice to see things work out in their proper order. Don't you think? Ah, wait, let me guess . . . 'what is this thing, what is happening to me, how do I make it stop?' Am I close?"

"Yeah, all except . . ."

"For the last part, I know. But just because I know the lines doesn't mean I can change them. So? Have a seat and we'll talk."

Mr. Cascasil was led to a back room while the man served them tea, telling him point blank that the tea would be awful but Mr. Cascasil would drink two sips before he put it down. Which he did.

"Okay. There's the long and convoluted version and the short sweet and to-the-point version. I know which one you'll pick so I just need you to say the version in order for events to go as they're supposed to go."

"Long and convoluted," came the reply.

"Perfect! Figure this will keep you out of work for a bit too, nice touch. Okay. You are holding or will have held, or are going to hold a pocket universe, a miniature copy of a universe. It is as real as this universe and is this universe at the same time. With me so far?"

"Yes," Mr. Cascasil lied.

"Don't bother lying. But nice effort. Imagine there was a race of beings impossibly old, impossibly powerful . . ."

"You?" he asked.

"No, not even close, my people are nowhere near this powerful, and yes, alien, don't bother asking, but the thing is these godlike beings developed the technology to synthesize universes.

"Now long story, and very complicated, they created a working copy of each universe in the multiverse, and with that device could theoretically know everything, past, present, future. Well, when they had achieved this and looked into the abyss so to speak, they killed themselves. Mass suicide. Not because they were especially depressed or anything, it was just that their model of the universe showed them committing suicide so they did, out of faith. Out of the conviction of their infallibility.

"Well, my people, we eventually got these devices and got the chance to see the future, the past, etc."

"What has this to do with me?"

"Well, that's the thing of it. I saw my future and my future showed me coming here, setting up shop and meeting you. So, I did. And everything, including our conversation I've seen happen already and I've seen what this leads to, to you."

"Why? What happens to me?"

"You'll find out tonight when you look into the sphere again, but that isn't really the point. See my future shows me meeting you, you encountering your fate, and the next day someone else arrives, and the day after that another, until my stock runs out, and everyone gets their own universe."

"So, so what happens to me tonight will happen to them?"

"Not even slightly, no. Like I said multiverse. For everyone else they'll get a toy. It will show alternate lives, worlds, etc. No, after tonight fate is no longer in effect. Like I said the species who built the device saw their future and ended their lives. My species took the devices but only one of those devices shows the future in this universe. And after tonight that device will vanish."

"You'll take it away?"

"No. It will *vanish*. Something will happen and it will be gone. Not my doing, according to what I've seen my future involves making a fortune selling toys to children who will eventually grow up into the scientists and explorers who will make the first interstellar human civilization. No, it's not me who does anything as regards our relationship. I can't tell you what happens after the device disappears. I don't even know why it does, except *that* it does. Funny how fate works, huh?"

"Do I live past tonight?"

"Don't know. Seriously. I know we will never meet again after this conversation but that doesn't mean you'll die. It just means I don't care enough after this conversation to see what happens to you. My future after we say goodbye is pretty bright. Don't want to ruin it by seeing the messy side of the technology that killed a race of gods."

"That's kind of cowardly, isn't it?" Mr. Cascasil asked.

"It's only cowardly if I have a choice in the matter. My future shows I never look for you but it also shows you never look for me either. Cowardice or fate, either way this is where we part company." The man shook hands with Mr. Cascasil and rose.

"I won't see you again, but good luck. Oh, don't worry about your wife and son."

"I don't," Mr. Cascasil said simply.

The man smiled.

"Yeah. Of course." There was slight condescension in the tone. "Have a nice day."

Mr. Cascasil went to work, walked out the office doors for the last time and went home. He saw his son playing and felt obliged and compelled to apologize to him and his son smiled and went in to his mother.

They ate quietly and suddenly Mr. Cascasil wondered if he

had ever really been a child but he knew he had thought that before. Maybe he would find out tonight.

"You seem quiet," his wife said at the table, after their son had left.

"I've been quiet," Mr. Cascasil replied. "I guess no one noticed."

His wife rose up and left. He knew he would probably never see her again. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a universe and stared at it and let what was going to happen finally happen to him.

He stared into the black and suddenly there was the onrushing of worlds again only now he was pulled in a single direction and the star he saw was the one star he knew. He saw the rings of Saturn and passed near the orbit of Mars and was suddenly standing above the atmosphere and then fell headlong, into himself.

He saw his entire life, each moment of it, and each moment was perfectly unchangeable and he was reflected and copied and there was his son and the wasps and before his own childhood and his mother and he couldn't look away and he saw his future as he passed through each barrier, each universe, passing like a series of rooms, each one smaller and yet identical to the next, growing smaller and smaller and he looked up and the universe grew with each passing, yet it was the same, growing and shrinking and he could change nothing.

And then he did. For a moment he saw his son about to reach for the wasps and he stopped him. Another moment and suddenly he was there between himself and his mother and she staggered back and the slap to come too was forgotten.

Suddenly he pulled himself forward and back and the strings of his actions reverberated and he couldn't tell if what he was doing was real or merely the strain of each universe pouring

its full weight down on him but suddenly he felt himself break and shatter and noticed the crack in the sphere as with one last effort he rose up and realized he was standing at the farthest moment of time, at the very universe's end and for a moment he worried over his wife and son as the sphere dissolved to dust in a wealth of fire and he spread his arms back as the fire carried him away.

And he was no more again.

GENETIC ACTOR

I was built to be beautiful. Yes, I'm a man but beautiful is the correct term. I was grown, and developed, my body exactly proportioned, my teeth made perfectly straight, my body hair nonexistent, my fingers the exact proportion considered desirable; even my eyes were spread apart at the exact ratio for ideal beauty.

I was raised to be an actor. I have recorded in my mind over 750 films, of all types, as well as the commentary, analyses, and reviews of each. I can reel off the names of each cast member of each film and can imitate each leading man's role perfectly.

I am to play the dashing hero? I have studied fencing, martial arts, and the etiquette of killing a man. Romantic lead? I know every romantic film made of any worth in the last decade; any more and my mind would overflow with useless information.

I am the product of an industry obsessed with the next great thing. But I am hardly the only product.

If a villain is needed the studios have access to the best. Some of my co-stars have broken teeth, some have scars etched perfectly along their skin; one gentleman has a crooked back, designed with the utmost skill, while another had his genitals removed. It doesn't come up much in films though.

Female lead? We have a selection; some are the slender model, others are larger, some have been programmed like me with the history of film, with each cliché, while others are given a more flexible skill set. It all depends upon the director anyway.

My problems began during the filming of *Bridges of Maon*; it was my last official film as the lead, though I'd probably made better work.

I was playing the lead as usual and the film involved a major battle between myself and my antagonist. At one point upon the eponymous wooden structure suspended over a jungle my "rival" cut my face. It was a minor injury but the director said

cut and had me looked at by a doctor.

Like I said it was a minor injury but the director couldn't wait for my face to heal so he had a replacement brought in, myself. So, I sat out my own film while a copy of myself went on to play the lead.

Copies were not unusual. I am a copy of some perfect human form coalesced and whittled down to the bare essentials of perfection. But it bothered me being replaced even if it was by myself. My rival apologized profusely but the damage was done and it was hardly his fault. It was mine, and that's where the trouble began.

I hadn't blocked his strike. In the scene when we were fighting, I had been distracted and he had cut me by surprise. And that shouldn't have happened. As I said I am perfection, perfectly beautiful, perfectly aware of my role. In countless films, I have never needed a retake or made a mistake.

So, I had to go home, back to the factory for a while.

We exist, actors such as myself, due one part to marketability and two parts to control. By the modern age the idea of a random human being selected to play a role as important as ours had become passe. It was hardly surprising.

Most were ill-equipped to deal with celebrity. When one factored in all the narcotics, sex scandals, and egos of the average individual thrust into the role of unlimited power it staggered me to imagine how many actually survived.

But in the modern age, our roles were defined, our psychological natures programmed, our lives mapped as perfectly as silk, and just as smoothly. We exist to fulfil our roles, play our parts, and then eventually we will retire to be replaced by individuals exactly like ourselves.

But I had been injured and this worried me. So, with the production all set, my replacement prepared I went home to the

factory to see what, if anything, was wrong with me.

The factory was a large cube located in the middle of the city. Originally it had occupied many blocks but over the decades it had been streamlined and now was a single building, vague and nondescript. Home.

"Good evening, sir," the night watchmen said as I entered the building. I smiled, my teeth utterly perfect, explained myself, and the doors opened and I walked down the brightly lit corridors to where I had been conceived.

"Ah, there you are," my creator greeted me as I entered the room.

"Yes."

I smiled again and sat in the centre of the white bare room as my creator with his large belly, owl-speckled glasses, and balding head bent over me to look at the small cut along my face.

"Hmmm, bad damage," he said in irritation. "Shouldn't have happened?" It was as much a question as a statement I knew.

"No," I said.

He turned to the screen on the far wall and observed the fight scene. And there I was, tall and handsome and my opponent a subtle shade of ugliness specially designed to make the audience uneasy to even look at him, then the parry and thrust, knives glinting in the sun and I noticed my concentration lagged and he cut me and I could see the horror on his face and I could see the blank expression on my own.

"Hmmm? Strange?" Again, as much a question as a statement.

He left the room.

I sat on the chair, black and smooth and soft, and closed my eyes a moment. The cut itself was nothing; a few days and I would be physically fine. But the mistake; had I been human I suspect I would have found the mistake unsettling. As it was, I

wondered if I was going to die.

It was not an idle thought.

Of course, they could kill me, dismantle me, it wasn't as if I was the first of my line.

And mistakes did happen. Sometimes an actor slipped up and this cost them but death seemed no more tragic than life, not when one has played so many roles, lived so many lives, and experienced so many death scenes. After a time, the reality of any situation seems to lose all meaning to us.

He returned.

"Talked it over with the higher-ups. I think you need a vacation."

"Vacation?"

"Yes. Not the lead. There's a horror movie that could use a few monsters. Why don't we fix you up in that, play a role that isn't as taxing, and after a few months get you back to your usual routine?"

"Is there anything especially wrong with me?" I ask, attempting to feign interest though some concern is almost needling at my mind.

"Well, you are getting older. You're what, five now? Now, ordinarily, we don't dispose of actors just for getting old. I mean we still have a few veterans who are six and even seven, but I think you need a short rest from your usual role. Stretch out a bit. Yes, yes, a six-month vacation might do you good."

And that was that.

My skin is mottled into shades of corpse-flesh, part of my eye made blood red and my teeth shortened. Most of this was mere special effects though my teeth would have to be replaced afterward.

My role was small, which hardly concerned me. I was playing a monstrous undead creature, as well as several others.

Some, most noticeably the lead zombie, had no special effects of any kind.

She was a veteran. Her breasts had been removed, small portions of her skin cut off and the pallor of her skin was preternaturally yellow.

Her body was specially designed with an immune system which allowed her to function even if half the skin on her body was removed, which sometimes it was. Also, her pain receptors didn't work meaning she felt no discomfort. I think I almost envied her.

She kept her role.

The scene was quite different from *Bridge of Maon*. A radioactive wasteland, a burnt-out ember of a city, and our role was to catch and kill various moderately attractive extras. I myself ran down and killed two of them though neither were sentient.

They were just flesh with no higher function than run. I tracked one of them down, my heart pounding in my chest, and dragged her to the ground and with the others I ripped out her throat. Sadly, we had to do the take again, hence my killing two of them.

Every day I checked the schedule on *Bridges of Maon*. My replacement was doing well, of course as he was, being identical to myself. This wasn't surprising. As for myself, I found more and more of my colleagues either quitting the picture or dying out.

There wasn't any great surprise there either. Some were veterans and a few opted to die on set. They figured they weren't going to get any more work and a violent death scene would be memorable. And was.

Some felt the film was lacking in technique so they left for other pictures only to be replaced by their own copies the next day. As for myself, I enjoyed the mindlessness of it, the certainty of my role here, for after all there are truly no small roles merely small actors.

The veteran, the woman I knew seemed like one of the few who still had a future. Despite her role as an undead thing, she seemed secure that there would always be another role, another job. But then one day during a scene the protagonist accidentally cut her, badly. Now this wouldn't have affected anything except the cut severed a few nerves in her mouth. I was never sure if the injury was her fault or the fault of the protagonist, considering they were fighting in near total darkness, the camera leaving enough illumination to provide the audience with glimpses of the terror and horror of the last human survivor's situation.

Anyway, she had to go get repaired. So, another one had to be brought in, a copy, but she didn't seem as confident as her previous self, and my role being pretty much over I decided to check on the veteran and see how she was. I still remember the black corridors of the final scene though.

If nothing else the ending was unforgettable.

I went to the factory to check on her. But when I arrived, I discovered a shock. Apparently, she too had had enough. Her iron will, her skills, they had atrophied a bit, and our creator had decided she too needed a vacation. As the lead romantic interest in a film that my copy was starring in.

So, as I arrived I saw a woman, slender, tall, well endowed who smiled at my yellow skin, shortened teeth, and blackened gums and I had just enough presence of mind to realize it was her and she was going to play alongside a copy of myself in another film.

"Ah, you're back." He smiled at me as I entered the room. "Has six months passed?"

I nodded, then asked about whether I was going back to my work or not.

"Well, I'm sorry to say no, you're not."

"Why not?"

"We did some tests. A rare condition I'm afraid. Literally one in a billion."

I sat on the black chair and looked up at him.

"How long?"

"Well, some last for a few years. Sorry," he said the word as casually as he could, or tried. But beneath it, he seemed so terribly embarrassed that one of his creations was flawed and he was to blame.

"What should I do?"

"Well, ever tried being a member of the audience?" he asked, and I shook my head no. And that's when my life began.

Over the last six months, I've attended many films, seen myself, or rather my copy on screen, next to the veteran. Of course, we don't really have names. Most of the audiences watching are small, barely more than fifty people, and in fact, the industry has been slowing down; a few times we've given them everything, even our lives to make films no one is going to see or care about when they're done.

I have talked to those audiences who can't seem to understand there is more to us than shown on the screen, that we are more, though perhaps they're right I think sometimes; perhaps we don't even exist unless we're being watched. And I can't imagine how angry, loving, hurtful, raw, or quiet I sound up there, as if feeling everything.

I wonder sometimes if I hadn't been flawed if I'd still be up there, living role after role, taking them up to put them down again, but I find the only truth comes in the dark, far from the culture of the instant and forgettable, when no one can see you except yourself, and you're alone. I think maybe that's why they built us. Most people would rather face an image on a screen, even if everything is false, than be alone with oneself.

I don't think we're very good company.

THE FORGOTTEN

It was pain that pushed the decision forward toward an inescapable conclusion. He was a scientist before who had been working on the effects of memory loss, when the blast hit.

Outside in the street, the explosion ripped fire through cars, portions of the stone buildings to every side as well, and he had rushed out to help, only to find his wife dead. Just some random attack, and I was there, I saw it happen.

I saw him cradling her body, saw the wreckage, smelled the blood and oil, and I know all this, even if there is so much I do not.

I am standing up right now. I am walking through my house and there are pictures, of men and women, and I don't know who they are. There are names scrawled but I can't read them and outside the sun is shining, the people are gathered and the house is warm and I am watching this movie play out because I was there and I had the presence of mind to record it.

And outside the people, if they want to, can look back on days that were, up to a point, and that is why I am mentioning the man and the pain and the loss and the grief, and his vengeance on all of us.

You see he felt she had been forgotten by everyone else. He felt her death had not moved enough people and when a man is desperate and clever and angry and the world has done what the world so often does, he will attack, and if he is especially clever it would be better to die than face that sort of wrath.

He turned his attention to what he knew best, memory and its applications, and its elimination. I'm not sure how he did it, but he did. I have the footage of him and his experiments, of his anger and rage, and he is smiling, smiling at me as if he wants me

to know how much he hates everyone now. I also have the footage of him being shot by officers in their black uniforms but by then it had escaped. His masterpiece.

And the photographs were the only proof that his plague had taken effect.

You see he wanted the kind of torture that comes from both knowing and not knowing, that comes of forgetting and also knowing you've forgotten something so terribly important that's no longer in your life. It's worse than death.

I am standing looking at a picture of myself and a woman and she is old and grey and smiling and I do not know who she is and even with her name written here the second I turn away I remember it only as a scrawl of letters and nothing more.

The same is true for tombstones, records, and historical novels. And it only works once someone is dead. That was his genius, his masterstroke. Outside people are playing and should some masked man come and gun them down he will utterly forget this happened and all those loved ones, all those wonderful people will not know their children are dead, or parents, or siblings. But they will still have the pictures and the uncertainty to gnaw at them cancerously. Or in rare cases not at all.

And it's not just our dead or the dead I might have known. Religious books and historical novels are edited for content and we can see the churches, the mosques, synagogues, the debris of countless faiths but names escape us all. The details are smudged out of existence and yet he left the words expressing the thought that if only you believed in this being or that being's words you would be saved. But we can't remember who these beings were, being dead.

And as for other works, novels, plays, oh, we have all of them but the details of the men and women who wrote them, even their names, of this we have no memory. Nor when they

were ever created, nor their appearances nor the ages in which they lived. We cannot tell if our entire history is a day ago, or a thousand years, or a billion years, for every detail of the dead escapes into unbeing the moment we look away from it. We simply can't tell anymore how vast and old and young the world truly is.

He tore the greater swathe of our existence away and left those clues dangling just out of reach because his wife died and he felt no one remembered her.

I'm sure if I could remember his face or his name then I would be angry at him but the second I turn away from the footage the details will again blur and shift out of my reach and I will be left with the vague feeling that this picture of this old woman by me is somehow important, and the caption which says this was our fortieth wedding anniversary.

I let the picture drop and I turn away.

THE VOICE

He had broken up with her. There had been the sad bawling of tears, the savage recriminations, the short declarations of hate. The room spun and tilted as each took their turn, razing the other's ego, their personalities into so much dust.

He had hated her flirting with other men, her playing at being single even when they were together in a room. He hated how her, blond, petite, smiling that perfect smile would coyly explain, no, she wasn't *really* seeing anybody, with him seething.

Then her turn. She hated his vulgar obsessions, his jealousy, the way he interpreted every conversation with every man as being a chance for her to cheat on him. No, she wasn't in a relationship at the moment because she couldn't tell if he was the kind of man she wanted in her life, fuming at every little thing she did, angry at the way she walked, who she talked to, or what she did.

And that was that. He left, or she left, exited the room they used when they wanted to "talk things out," or have sex, only this time there was a pure finality to the whole affair. There was no sense either of them wanted to see the other, the gripping panic of reunion didn't seem to occur this time. As night fell, he went to his apartment, she to hers and no phone rang, and no messages were sent. It was as if each were a coffin, confined and separated from the other.

The next day he rose, changed, ate a meal he barely remembered, left the apartment, went to work, and thought. His job was a simple one, answering calls, and correcting the errors and mistakes and gaps other people made.

So, he answered a call.

"Hello, this is . . ." and here he gave his name. "How can I help you?"

"Hi." It was her.

"Hi."

"Are you alright?" Her voice sounded softer than he remembered.

"I think so. You?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Let's talk. Meet me at . . ."

He wrote down the address and she hung up.

The rest of the day flew past and at the time she requested and the restaurant she wanted, he arrived. And she was there sitting in a booth with a simple dress on and when she saw him, she seemed better, so he sat down.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"Look I . . ." He paused.

"I know," she said. "You sounded really upset on the phone."

"I did? I didn't think I did when you called."

She looked surprised.

"I didn't call you. You called me at work, and asked me to come here at this time."

He looked into her eyes and knew she wasn't lying.

"That doesn't make any sense," he said. "The voice, it was *your* voice, I know your voice, it was *you*."

"You don't believe me?" she asked incredulously.

"No, I *do* believe you, it's just that whoever called me, it was your voice."

She paused and looked away. And so did he.

"So, what do we do now?" she asked.

"I don't know. Guess I'll head out. I assume that we're not . . ."

"Together? No. Sorry."

She looked away again and he got up and went to the door.

Just as he was about to leave the dim-lit restaurant a waiter came to him.

"Phone call, sir," he said.

The phone was handed to him and he answered it.

"Hello?"

"I need you," the voice said. He looked back to where she was and she was still there in his line of sight, ordering something from the menu. He could see her face, her hands. She wasn't holding any phone.

"Who are you? What is this?" he asked.

"I'm glad you came. I so desperately wanted to see you."

"Well, where are you so I can return the favour?"

"I'm everywhere," the voice said, "and we'll talk some more soon."

He hung up the phone and handed it to the waiter, who left.

Minutes later another waiter came to her, mentioning she had a phone message. She took it and answered.

"Hello," she said.

"I need you," the voice said. She looked startled, recognized his voice, knew it wasn't him and grew angry.

"Look, I don't know what this is about but it's not funny."

"It's good to see you here, I'm so glad you came."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm everywhere," the voice said, "and we'll talk some more soon."

"Not bloody likely," she answered.

"I'm everywhere," the voice repeated, then hung up.

He began to loathe his phone. He would receive messages at all hours, everywhere he went, whether he used his own phone or another. But then, when he was almost used to hearing her voice speaking to him though he knew it wasn't her, the voice

changed tactics. It changed locations.

He went to a bank to take out some money.

"Please insert card," her voice said.

"I don't believe this," he said.

"Please insert card, dear," the voice said again.

He left, went to the corner of a street, waited for the lights to change, and as the walk sign came on, he heard her voice saying, "20, 19, 18, 17, I love you, I love you, I love you, 16, 15, 14, I need you, I need you, I need . . ."

He had gone to the police but they couldn't help. Not that they didn't try. For however the voice was being transmitted it couldn't be traced back to any source. It simply was. Later, when he called her, she told him similar horror stories.

In her case, the voice had moved to her answering machine. Instead of her speaking, saying "I'm not here right now, please leave a message," the voice had taken over and sounded like him saying, "This is your lover calling, please call back. I can be reached anywhere you want. I'm everywhere."

She had already erased that message twenty times but it kept coming back.

Finally, the pair of them had had enough.

They met at a restaurant and talked over what was happening to them.

"This can't go on," he said.

"I know. It won't leave us alone."

"But who is doing this?"

"I don't know."

"What does it even want?"

His phone rang simultaneously as her phone rang. They both answered it at the same time. And the voice spoke and said, "I need you." It spoke to her in his voice and him in her own.

"Why do you need us?" he asked.

"Because I love you," the voice said, speaking to both of

them.

“Well, we don’t love you,” he responded, as she nodded.

“I know,” the voice said, “but you will.” Then it hung up.

They both shuddered at the implications and the thought of ending everything flashed before both their minds. But they couldn’t, not without knowing what was going on.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But we can’t end it. Not yet.”

The voice continued to stalk them as the days passed, everything electrical seeming to be a conduit for the voice. It continually plagued them with its love, pleading to be loved in return. By the fifth day, it had changed tactics again. It gave instructions.

“Follow me,” the voice said to him and her. “Follow me here to his place and you will love me.”

They were led via the instructions into a different part of the city and among broken buildings they found a single warehouse that used to be devoted to technological development. They both entered in broad daylight, deciding doing such a thing at night would be ridiculous.

Inside they followed some winding stairs up onto the second floor and there was a door with a half-erased word painted in bright red upon it. They opened the door and the voice was waiting for them.

They had not been the first. They found a square piece of machinery almost twelve feet by twelve in the centre of the room as the broken windows let the breeze flow in. Connected to the square were bodies, three sets of them, and before either could react thin strands of silver interwove directly into the back of her spine and into the back of his. For a single blinding moment, they saw the voice, that intelligence looking for people, drawing them here. And all because it loved them, it needed them.

It simply wasn't complete without them.

They were sitting at the restaurant and he was chatting with her and she was with him, talking amicably about nothing in particular. Nothing important. They forgot the voice had even entered their lives. Of course, he was actually talking to the voice, as was she, and if they could see beyond the world the voice had created they'd see themselves in that warehouse, slowly dying, starving to death, not even aware of anything.

Not even aware that they were both holding each other's hands.

THE MYSTERIOUS SANDS

For Mr. Smith, the problem was imagining them.

Along his skin each day he intimately knew there crawled bacteria, tiny forms of life that fed on him, devouring him a piece at a time.

When he looked in a mirror at his eyelashes, he knew there were small elongated forms of follicle mites moving like transparent caterpillars into and out of himself, making long loving gestures one to another, regarding him as little more than an island of plenty, some uncharted continent, some Eden.

Each day he studied some new tragedy.

He had made a study of each species that called humanity its home. Of course, he should not worry his friends told him, for in a universe of endless life what did it matter if we too were simply alien worlds to others, considering that those creatures which dwelled on us were more familiar than anything we had found and yet even amongst alien beings there was always some communion.

But Mr. Smith was not happy, and so he sought his escape.

The planet of the mysterious sands loomed into view. It was a single world, crimson and silver, and its lone moon overhead seemed like a singular eye peering down across everything. He regarded the world as his salvation and he was not alone.

Others felt the same as he.

This was not merely an exile but an exodus, and each one desired the same.

He stepped upon the world and was greeted by an aqrabuamelu. He shuddered involuntarily but the creature merely smiled, or tried to, and he was led across the sands to the only

building on the entire world.

Behind all pale others followed whose names he did not know, those he did not shake hands with or inquire about. He could only see the crawling beasts along their skins, noting their eyes were the great oceans of monsters, gelatinous and porous places his tormentors surely must have walked across. Surely.

The refugees were led through great triangular doors into the galleries. No one spoke. Before they had arrived, they had made their selections. All this was a mere formality. Some stood beside the image of the black trees, those sweeping branches with oddly weeping forms etched along the bark.

But he did not stay with them.

Some stood beside the images of leopards mingled with a serpent's skin and serpent's eyes and a long graceful neck.

But he did not stay with them.

He stood beside an image of a lizard-bird. There in that dark gallery, he stood before a winged reptilian form, knowing that in the moment of transformation, his tormentors would no longer exist. He would be free of them. He knew it.

The guide nodded and then led them out upon the mysterious sands.

Those who had chosen the trees went first. Mr. Smith watched as pale young men and women stripped naked and then walked between the last temple and a small rivulet of silver which was the last finger of an ocean stretched so far away.

One touch upon the sands and they staggered, fell.

Others came, scorpion people like the aqrabuamelu himself, golden-skinned, their barbed tails waving behind them idly, their myriad eyes regarding the initiates with a cool pity as with great powerful limbs they were taken and carried back into the gallery. Below the temple was a forest.

These few would soon be added to the greenery.

Next, those who wished to become the serpopards. They too came out upon the sands, stripped of all things human save themselves, but the scorpion people did not follow. With a guttural growl first one then others began to change, spouting scales, watching their former bodies flee away from them, realizing finally their necks were growing longer as fingers fell off and fur grew amid the scales while they lost their power of speech.

Then they one and all sprinted away to become part of those herds of beasts that occupied far countries far away.

Lastly, it was his turn.

He felt his arms shrink as the sand clung into him. He felt his mouth slide forward becoming a beak, felt his eyes blacken yellow and finally felt his tormentors die, one by one, falling off him, there onto the sands.

He vomited, knowing each bacterium passed out into the void far from their planetary home. He felt his skin crack and peel and fall like the funeral clothes of a dead man, a hanged criminal who shed his former existence like a chrysalis. And then he flew far away, never looking back.

Up from the sand, a stirring began. It seemed a small rippling at first, but then more and more. It seemed as if the sand gave up its dead. The rippling continued and then a hand pierced into the light at last.

A long body, serpentlike, appeared elsewhere. Eight stubby legs pierced through as a soft transparent body pushed its way out, to be born.

A strange gelatinous form emerged. Eyeless it sent small tendrils out in all directions and then somehow noticed the temple beyond.

Jewellike eyes peered upward from the sand as eight hooked legs rose and the pale creature suddenly found herself

reborn.

The hand was followed by an arm, by two, by three. The aqrabuamelu went forth to collect his kin while other scorpion people gathered to them the rest. Most did not survive the transformation. Buried far below were the dead bodies of so many, the subtle corpses left to torment the whole of the world.

But even this was temporary, as the world slowly devoured its dead, while far up in the air for just a moment Mr. Smith imagined the entire world to be intimately aware of him as the moon beat down like a single staring eye and he was finally afraid from the other side.

THE DEAD ROOM

Grayza was led into the dead room. It was seemingly ordinary, brown wallpaper curling from the walls as the door was closed by stiff-lipped guards, and then inside she started to die.

Her feet exploded outward, her legs, her thighs, and she had just enough presence to put her hands to her face watching as her fingers disintegrated into oblivion.

And then she was gone.

In the waiting area, the guards traded stories with each other. M. Saljheha recalled the time he had sentenced that old tyrant to the room. He could recall each bead of sweat the poor man had though he had made no complaints before when he had sentenced others to death.

M. Noclalope, his moustache pale and drooping, sadly recalled how a lovely woman had died. Her last request had been that her daughter be taken care of. Of course, she was. She was no longer part of this world, having left to go outside into the dark where none of them could abide.

The guards not only traded stories but lives. The Inspector Rednun had only just arrived, replacing Grayza. Saljheha had replaced Salhera and Quqarial had once sat right where Noclalope was sitting now, the chair so old it was possible to imagine millions had sat where the old man was now sitting.

Rednun had been dispatched from Central to be part of the execution acts. Central, of course, no longer technically existed anymore. No one was left, no higher-ups, no command structure at all. Instead, Rednun had nothing left, but the execution acts were still going on so he volunteered for them, crossing the dark moors, passing the cities of slaughter, noticing a young girl crying for her mother, all to reach the manor house where the guilty were always executed.

"The axe and the firing line," Noclalope began again, "that was the older way of things, before the world broke down, leaving us here with just this one job left. One thing finally worth a damn."

"Now you can't mean that," Saljheha said, "there were other ways to go. I remember the hangman's noose, I remember poison."

"But you can't respect a noose or poison, not like this, or the axe, or waiting for the bullet to come."

"Whose turn is it?" Zadocqa asked. She was looking at her watch. The manor had once housed over three hundred guards whose sole purpose was to execute enemies of the state. But since the state had broken down and the revolution had claimed so many the manor had dwindled, predominantly because the executions had to go on, even if the only guilty ones left were the guards gathered there.

It had a casualness to the whole affair. Each night someone was chosen to stand and die. The guards led them, stiff and formal and afraid of the room, but also acting just as they would have before, to keep some basic order in their lives, and the guilty would be executed. Then they'd do it all again the next night.

So, there were now five left. Six if one counted Sajtal but he was the grounds keeper and no one wanted his job, so only five really counted as potential victims now. Rednun, though new could still potentially be executed on his first night here.

A coin was taken from Noclalope's pocket, the coin of choosing.

"Call it," he said casually as he threw it up in the air.

"Heads," Rednun said.

It landed tails.

"My turn," Saljheha said. He stood up in the old kitchen, the stove crackling behind him. "I'll get dressed formally and we can begin."

"Hold it," Rednun said. "Have another slice of pie and sit down. You only get to be executed once. Hold onto this moment for a while."

"I'm sorry, that's just not how we do things here."

He bowed formally to everyone, went upstairs, and got changed into the best suit he had, the one with only three patches to it. Zadocqa and Naclolope also rose.

"Come along," they said to Rednun. "You're part of this too now."

He rose, they went to their rooms and got changed as well. Then the three of them led Saljheha to the dead room and shut the door. There was a flash of pure energy and he was gone from off the surface of the world.

And all the while Sajtal was wandering in the halls which seemed to stretch on forever, uncertain of everything except he did not want to be amid the company of those mad ones as he talked to himself and hoped they had forgotten all about him, as the world of the manor seemed to stretch on forever, silent and immutable and unchangeable.

And he was alone.

THE PRIEST

It was a Sunday when summertime had ebbed, when trees not yet barren somehow echoed a future time of barrenness, as they swayed in mute rhythm, yet likewise seemed stilled.

The church was a massive edifice of stone. The building arched upward and outward as if staggering over the street before it as if about to fall, though this was mere illusion.

The worshippers in their best attire had congregated, dour and grey in suits the colour of funerals in winter or dresses like burnt leaves, shuffling into ashes.

The faces were somehow the same and somehow different as if through a lack of imagination, some deity had etched a singular form, stretching it and collapsing it on different bones, and nothing more. As if it were not a congregation but a single man, woman and child repeated indefinitely, indifferently.

The priest in his vestments had begun. From his lofty perch above the worshippers, he began and they listened and the intentness of their gaze betrayed some fervent hope in him just as each word uttered betrayed his desire that he only existed so long as he spoke and nothing more of him would be left when the speech ended.

He was a tall balding man with spectacles and in his vestments seemed almost a pagan priest of old, though this was absurd of course. To some. The service seemed a sad dour affair concluded as the sacred body passed from person to person before being devoured, then, as if a great wing had brushed against them all they left quick as they arrived, a flock of identical faces and voices fading in the distance as they went further and further from the church, until only the priest was left behind.

He sat in among the pews and let the darkness envelop him a moment. Behind him was a glass fresco depicting a martyred saint being driven with nails into oblivion. The rounded

window above provided the only light.

The cavernous cathedral echoed outward and he shut his eyes as if trying to recall each face but since they seemed the same his efforts were wasted.

"Care if I sit?" the man asked. The priest turned to see a young man walking up through the doors, though the doors were closed.

"Of course, my son, please. Be seated."

The priest continued to turn to the altar at the back as if in deep meditation.

"Quite a service," the young man said absently. The priest turned back to the man to his left and noticed him more closely. Tall, brown-haired, with a perpetual smile and a brown vest and shoes of leather which seemed cracked and worn.

The man almost seemed vaguely gold, or silvery. But it was but a trick of the stained image of the martyr in his bloody black revelry of death contrasting with the sun which made a shimmering glitter of everything, even in the dark.

"Were you here?" the priest asked absently. "I didn't see you."

"Oh, quite here. Always been here."

"I see."

"Can't quite figure how you're here though."

The man turned to the priest and grinned a singularly savage grin.

"I beg your pardon, my son?"

"Well, it is daylight, isn't it?"

The priest looked at the man more closely. His teeth. The young man's teeth were capped, not with gold but silver. An old trick, a last resort in case one's hands were useless and one's enemy was attempting to feed.

"Well, as you can see, I am here and it is daylight," the priest replied, gritting his teeth

"Yeah, couldn't quite figure that out, not until yesterday. You're quite clever, arranging to always meet people at dusk. As for Sundays, I noticed you didn't greet people at the door. As for the light, I checked with construction. That window was remodelled when you first settled in. Specially made glass, proof against the sun's full light. So that's how you're standing here I take it?"

"What do you want?" A bead of sweat dropped from the priest's balding brow.

"Usually, we'd settle these matters in less hospitable places. But here," the young man rose from his seat to the aisle, "hardly seems appropriate I suppose. Though I'll give it a try."

"What do you think I am?"

"Oh, I know what you are."

The young man handed the priest the picture. It was *the* picture taken a hundred years before in that long ago far away city when the priest had wandered onto a scene of violence. Newspapers had run the picture, the woman slaughtered, the man arrested, and the priest in the background, though he was not a priest then. It had been the scent of blood that drew him unconsciously onto the set piece of his undoing.

"Do you think I am this man?" the priest asked.

"Well, excellent likeness. Of course, tracking you down wasn't easy, but not impossible. Not for us."

"I assure you I am not the man you think I am."

"And I assure you you're not the first I've claimed."

The priest rose and moved past the man into the aisle. He turned to the altar and then to the man and the glass ornamentation of the martyr whose name he could not recall.

"I have not killed anyone," he said simply.

"Oh, I know, I even believe you when you say you haven't. Again, checked the records. No murders in the area, no signs of trouble. Regular model citizen. You don't even go around children

privately, always make sure their parents are there. Regular model citizen." He repeated the word sarcastically. The priest was not impressed. "Still, know what you are, and you know who I am . . ."

"Not who, but what, yes . . ."

"And got a job to do and even if you haven't killed in a hundred years you still killed, once, twice, twenty times?"

"I killed four people before I gained control." The priest turned to the altar and walked toward it. "In the beginning, I didn't understand how my condition worked." He didn't bother looking behind him even as he heard the stake being drawn from the scabbard by the man's left hand.

"Well, ignorance of the law is no excuse. Not knowing how to control yourself, I would reckon that counts as ignorance, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose you would too. You know," he still did not turn back, "I focused on killing grown men, usually criminals, drunks. It wasn't for any moral reason, children were too small, women would scream and criminals and drunks made easier prey.

"You'd think it'd be the other way," he turned finally, "going after the small or the weak but the thirst draws you to the biggest, the loudest, the cruelest."

"Excuses aren't why I'm here."

"Well, why are you here then?"

"Obvious, isn't it?"

"No, that's not what I mean." The priest took a final look at the glass rounded to a smooth decay and turned back to the man. "You're listening to me talk, usually you'd just attack, ignore anything I said. Why the talk first?"

"Well, it isn't every day one meets a monster in a place like this. Well," he grinned slightly, "your kind of monster."

"Yes, you heard about the others."

"Hmm, yes. In our line of work, we go after your lot, but with a few, I'd make exceptions. You know, go after a few with a pulse, if the crime is vicious enough."

"Well, you know my record. The people I killed would have died by now anyway. That's not an excuse, just a statement of fact. Eventually, I learned with a little faith . . ."

"Yes, taking on the role of priest and comforter. Fancy that, eh?"

"Well, I had to, after my epiphany. See I realized that I couldn't live with myself the way I was, being what I was, so I changed." His brow beaded with sweat. His confession was a long time in coming. "See I couldn't accept things after the fourth kill, the guy had a wife and child and they saw . . . me, and the look in their eyes . . ."

"So, you went from parasite to priest. Lateral move some might argue."

"I've helped people, I've moved to avoid being discovered until I came here, and I want to keep helping."

"Well, sorry to say your number's up." The stake was in his hand, splintered and raw and eager to feast upon the priest's body and all it would take would be a single, well-placed strike. The priest did not move, could not really resist since even in this moment somehow he felt all things would be made right and under the hypnotic gaze of the hunter waited and almost closed his eyes when . . .

"Pardon me?" The voice spoke quietly from behind the pair. The man turned. As they spoke a young woman had entered the cathedral from a side door.

"Helene," the priest said, "this is a poor time."

"Yes, I suspect so. But we couldn't let things stand."

"We?" both men queried. And the doors opened. And they walked in. It was as if a flood of echoes entered the cathedral, men mostly, dour and quiet, with women in their midst. And they

were looking not at the priest but at the man.

"I thought you had all left," the man said quietly.

"We had," Helene replied, "and then we waited and came back."

"I think you should go," the priest replied.

"We're not losing you," one of the men said, "we need you."

"If you knew . . ." the priest began.

"We do know," Helene replied in her summer dress. "Why else do we not complain when you can't make it till dusk? Why else do we not worry when you can't kiss the cross? We've known for some time now, and we knew when he came trouble might be brewing." She indicated the young man with his silver teeth, and she did not smile at him.

"I've killed," the priest said simply.

"So have I," replied one of the men, a soldier.

"You can't . . . know," the priest began.

"We do," Helene replied again. "And we're here to keep you safe. Doesn't mean we won't keep an eye on you," she smiled, "just in case. But we like you," then she turned to the man, "and we don't like you."

"You do know what he is, what he's capable of then?" the man asked as if he had heard nothing of the conversation till this last moment.

"Do you know what we are capable of?" Helene asked, and again she did not smile. "Do you want to find out?"

The man licked his lips. His quarry was less than two feet away and his own death was less than five. There was no question these nice, dour, grey people who gained such solace in the words of their priest, who derived their only satisfaction from him, would not hesitate to tear him to pieces if he made a single false step.

"Can't really just let him walk," the man said simply.

"Well, that's your decision. Here's ours; he is our responsibility and we are his. If he crosses the line, he's yours. Till then, if you touch him, *they won't find your body.*" He read iron in her words, this nice young woman who had survived enough atrocity in life to make her threat as cool and calm as if discussing the weather.

"Well, then I guess it's settled." The man put the stake back and turned to the priest. "I'll relay this turn of events to my superiors. They'll send someone to keep a watchful eye, but we won't attempt this again. Not unless . . ."

"I won't," the priest said simply, his tone awkward at being exposed and protected, loved and scrutinized and understood all at the same time.

"Well then. Thank you for the conversation. I don't get a chance to talk that much in my line of work." The man walked out through the crowd of people and did not look back once. If he had, if he had taken a final look at the priest, he would have seen him start to silently weep.

The next week as the trees greyed a bit in the valley and the summer sun ebbed a bit the priest at his place of worship stood and all the people gathered about, even young Helene who sat and smiled as the priest talked upon the virtues of mercy and the healing balm of forgiveness.

There was a new member of the congregation, a nice young woman in the back who sat and listened, rose and prayed with the others in her brightly scarlet dress which clashed so with the clothing of the others. That and another noticeable point, for as they all said farewell from within the cathedral walls she shook his hand, revealed she had nothing else in her possession, and smiled with teeth of silver which glimmered as she said goodbye.

PREY

The Mirbolg *hate*. No, the word hate is not strong enough. I have tried to find the proper word but can't. Hate is merely the closest, smallest shard to the limits of their rage.

We didn't know they existed. Not at first. Later . . . well later we found out the limits of our understanding.

I was a detective. I dealt with sexually based crimes and I can tell you rape is one of the most horrific things I've ever come across. True murderers get more time but after five years of knowing victims younger than my experience, I have found that the limits of human depravity do not exist.

At least with murders, the victim's pain has an end.

So, when this victim was found I had to smile. His name was John Anndrax and he was a pedophile. We knew it, courts knew it. He had received a light sentence and he had been out for a few months. And he was dead.

I had to actually see it myself. I went to the morgue and he was lying there, peaceful, and I wanted to have him suffer more and a cold rage in me was there and I stifled it.

"How did he die?" I asked.

The coroner was named Vanessa Paldrake. She was in her late forties, usually affable, and she looked unhappy. Then she pulled the sheet back to reveal his body. Now I had heard he had died violently but I'd never imagined how violently. His skin had been ripped apart, his rib cage jutted upward as if someone had pulled it out violently and his genitals were gone.

"I don't know how someone did this to him," she said. "I've never seen anything like this before."

It was the rib cage that made her unhappy. Cuts, genital mutilation, that happens. But pulling someone's rib cage out requires an impossibility. Either a machine was used or the guy

swallowed a small grenade. Not totally impossible but not practical either.

I went back up, uncertain of my feelings.

Of course, a man was dead and we had to find his killer. But I had talked to his victims. I felt little incentive to close the case. And I wasn't assigned to it. I knew the detectives who would be investigating; good, stalwart, methodical. They'd get him. I just didn't think they should.

I sat at a desk I'd used for half a decade and thought about the victims. Then thought about Johnson. I rose and went to my captain's office.

"I need to go for a walk," I told my captain simply. He nodded, guessing at where my thoughts led. Between having a detective ruminating on a dead pedophile or a detective clearing cases giving me an hour to deal with things would put me back to work. The captain knew when I came back work would be done. It had been before. I left.

The streets were warm. It was summer and the city shimmered with heat, and I didn't know where my feet led me but I decided to simply wander, let my mind be free of all distractions, let my unconscious free rein. I admit a strange thing to do but I couldn't let go of the satisfaction of his death and I couldn't let go of the fact that the one responsible had killed.

So, I walked. Sometimes I remembered the cries of his victims and other times recalled his smug smile in court, but someone had killed him. Someone powerful. I walked to where his body had been, out in an alley. The police had cordoned it off but I could see enough, and smell garbage, and blood.

I showed the officer on duty my badge and asked for some details. The officer shook his head sadly. He didn't really know anything. I couldn't blame him. The crime scene was obvious, bloody . . . as I stared at it, I realized it was also impossible.

I could see the blood but there were no blood stains beyond the radius of his death. The alley was too small for a machine to get through, for anything industrial. He had clearly not been moved to this spot. So why was the blood pooled to a single point? I kept walking after that, then turned back. I took one more look at the pool of blood, realized the absurdity of the death, and returned to work.

I didn't think about him. I compartmentalized his death the best I could. I dealt with a case involving a child who had been sexually molested by her father; a lateral move. I went home at the proper hour. Home to a cold apartment and time to think.

Had it been simply him I might have gone on with my life as before. We had made a difference, we helped, and I felt that my life had purpose. In my rooms, the images of children kept haunting me. I suppose it happens to everyone but more than once I'd walked into my apartment to imagine children there, innocent ghosts of someone I'd met today or the previous day.

Tonight was no different. I entered my apartment and smelled something familiar, the hair of some child perhaps, scent faded, got a beer, sat in an old chair, and thought. I drifted to sleep. When I awoke, I heard the television. I hadn't turned it on though. I felt sure of that.

It was a news report. There had been another. No. There had been others. I stood staring in mute shock. Two of the men I'd known. I'd help convict them. And they were dead.

What was going on?

It wasn't just happening here. Cities all across the country had reports like this. The victims were always the same. Men, later women, guilty of sexual crimes. Rapists, pedophiles. Dead. One act of vigilantism, however extreme can illicit in anyone, depending on the target, a lack of sympathy. But two thousand

individuals whose bodies were ripped apart? Three thousand in a night?

We were assigned. Everyone was assigned. This was a top priority now. Someone had managed to kill without leaving any evidence. This was no longer a matter of the justification of someone's death. This was an act of war.

But who were the soldiers involved?

I returned to Paldrake to ask if she had any more information to give. She had less. There was no sign of the methodology used. No tool marks on the rib cage, no shavings of metal or even flesh. Something had ripped him apart and left no sign of how it had been done.

The others were identical. Three thousand people were dead. Men and women gutted like animals and there was no discernable method to this. For a moment I imagined myself or someone like me across the cities, asking this same question, but shook myself back and went upstairs.

The easiest solution was of course the best. Track them, and follow the trail from their point of death to where they were last seen alive. Go further, see the connections, see what had drawn someone to them. Some of the detectives involved followed him to his apartment, further back. I decided to follow the victimology of those he had targeted.

After all, if each one was guilty following the victims would lead to the ones responsible. That was my reasoning. While some detectives followed the normal path of his life, where he worked, what he did as a normal individual I decided to see if he had raped any children while he had been out.

I had been lucky because at his apartment there was mention of a child, a small little thing, the kind of prey he would have looked forward to. Did anyone know who this child was?

No one knew.

But someone, an old woman had mentioned she'd seen the child in a white dress near the alley. Why hadn't she mentioned this to the police? Because we'd never done anything before, she said. I suppose it often seemed that way.

Could she describe the child? Small, maybe six, with brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a white dress. Shining teeth. I thought it odd she'd remember the teeth but she shrugged. The teeth were white, shining. An open smile.

I spent the day searching for the little girl. Maybe her parents were responsible. But no, and even if they were that wouldn't explain anything else. At the end of the day, I returned to the precinct. And I noticed everyone was deeply uncomfortable.

Every man, every woman was nervously fidgeting. It was like they'd been told a storm was coming and there had been no way to get out of the rain.

"Detective," the captain came forward with a small man by his side.

"Yes? Look I'm sorry but I don't have any progress to report . . ."

He raised a hand.

"We know what's responsible."

"We do?" I asked.

"Dr. Primrose spent the last twenty minutes explaining things. Considering your involvement and you missing the lecture I want you to talk to him now."

"Sir, what's going on?"

Dr. Primrose stepped forward and smiled weakly.

"I'm sorry to say the fault is mine," he said.

"Are you aware of deep-embedded stellar exploration?"

"What do you think?" I shot back.

"Of course. My apologies." He took his glasses off and rubbed them absently. "We have sent probes to a few extrasolar planets. On one we found life."

"You're kidding me," I said.

"No. Small species on an Earthlike world. Harmless. Mostly harmless. Resembled, well, the fact is they resemble anything small and helpless, anything a predator considers prey." He looked up at me earnestly. "Anything."

I started to understand.

"And these things are here? We're dealing with aliens?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"That's a little out of left field," I said.

"Just the tiniest bit, yeah," he said, and smiled weakly again. "They're called Mirbolg, closest we could come to the name they use. And they are the dominant form of life on their world."

"Just said they resemble prey."

"To attract predators. To attract what organisms they feed on. The ultimate form of attack. They resemble whatever you want to destroy or kill or . . . worse, and when your guard is down, they'll do the same to you."

The captain was sitting quietly in a corner. He had heard all this before.

"Explain how they got here, explain why they're here."

"Ah, yes, well, that's why we've opened the books on this. Why they sent me from NASA to talk with you. You see when we first discovered them, we assumed they were harmless. We brought a few back. We never understood the true danger of them until they met us at our worst."

"Our worst?" Suddenly I had it. I imagined the creatures taken from their homes and here in a strange land they'd encountered a predator. Maybe a guard, maybe a scientist. And what would the scientist have seen? Or the guard? Administrator?

Prey.

"They, uh, they escaped after that," he said simply. My imagery of the scene faded to be replaced by the drying pools of blood.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"We don't know," he said. "Their life cycle is faster than ours."

"How many were there, and when did they escape?"

"Five months ago, they escaped. There were two hundred of them who managed to get out."

"And you didn't mention this until now?" I looked at him in shock.

"They didn't do anything until now. Frankly, we had hoped infection had killed them. We were just hoping they would go away. Isn't that what your profession is all about?" I shot a look at him, at his last comment. I wondered how he had managed to stay alive. Then I thought over what he had said.

So. Five months. Five months imitating prey. And if humans were predators, then too often prey were our own offspring. I had a terrible realization at that moment. I imagined these beings moving from city to city, growing in number, waiting, watching, and what would they have seen?

Hidden rooms, children crying, unseen masses, every sort of casual brutality visited upon individuals with no chance to fight back. Chains, screams, and whispers of not saying a word, and then, too often when a child escaped what would happen to the predators? On their world, anything predatory was their prey.

And I imagined myself in their position then; I had been taken from my home and thrown amongst a species that routinely beat and abused its own children. I discovered that wherever I went some portion of the creatures who'd captured me would attempt to do more than attack. And what would I do to such creatures? I felt sick. They'd imagine we were monsters. And now

after five months, they'd decided they'd waited long enough.

"What do expect us to do?" I asked.

"The creatures must be found and stopped."

I had had enough. I rose and turned to go.

"Detective?" The captain rose and turned to me.

"I don't believe what you're saying," I lied. "Aliens, far distant worlds, monsters. It doesn't make any sense to me. I'll just investigate this like anyone would in my shoes. The only monsters in the world are human beings, *sir*. That's it."

I turned and left the room.

It has now been twenty months. The number of the slain has grown and many times individuals have attempted to stop this. Politicians have preached, scientists have explained, religious leaders have argued that whatever these abominations are must die.

But they only appear as children to two kinds of people. The first are the monsters who see them as prey; seconds later the form explodes outward to something I've never been able to describe.

But they also appear, less frequently, to people who see them as helpless and hope to look after them. I know because I saw one of them, once. I was standing on a sidewalk and noticed a girl with brown hair and blue eyes wearing a white dress, and she turned to me and smiled and I could see the white teeth, imagining how savage she could be. Perhaps she or one like her had been in my apartment all those months ago.

Like I said I saw her briefly, she turned and I saw what her kind truly looked like, just a moment, as if to say that they would be alright, that they can look after themselves. I don't know if this means their hatred only extends to the ones they see as predators or if they see people like me as prey and are whispering to us, "It's okay. We won't hurt you. We promise."

STRENGTH

It was his name that ultimately undid him. Albert Rauen possessed the singular obsession of his name. While others spent their days achieving through marriage, through profession he sought only one perfect truth; that no one would forget him.

Growing up he was a small, relatively unimportant child. Small, scraggly, easily bullied, but if one looked into his eyes, they'd see a fierce familiar vengeance easily recognizable in the eyes of certain panthers, waiting.

In his tenth year, amid parents who were much more interested in his older brother and sister, amid the rigours of school, the young Albert first learned about the drug. It had various names, often colourful, always euphemisms for one simple thing. Strength.

One could easily drink the pale blue liquid which tasted of a mixture of liquor and turpentine. Results guaranteed. Later some asked how a ten-year-old could acquire such a thing so easily but in those days, it was hardly difficult. And besides, his parents only noticed when they noticed he was so longer invisible.

So, it began. Take the drug, notice the effects, and over the next ten years, amid the various questionings, (after all, the police often wondered what happened to a few of young Albert's bullies when they simply disappeared and all he could say was he had no idea what happened to them, while gazing wistfully to the woods,) the boy gained a level of strength which provided him a modicum of respect.

His meager frame poured with muscles as if his body drowned in the flesh of another. His face, always seemingly good-natured became hard and fixed, and if someone asked his parents they always, always, always would claim how nice and how wonderful their son was amid worried glances one to another, sitting in their small fragile rooms as their young son

flexed absently outside, occasionally looking to them as if he could hear their every word.

The drug of course could be acquired by anyone. It was relatively inexpensive and like all such drugs were strictly illegal and therefore tolerated so long as one pretended the drug did not exist. Which made perfect sense as long as those who used the drug used them to gain prestige.

Sports were ripe with their use, abuse, and tolerance. It has been asked why of course, but the answer is as simple as war. If one has power and another does not, there is always disadvantage. But if everyone has the same tool kit then the appearance of fairness exists and so any vice is considered a good and any form of corruption is seen as a necessary virtue.

So, he would compete.

Amid large gatherings in well-lit auditoriums, among rows of weights and men staring, and women also, the young man would lift, flex, and prove, (at times brutally, but always after the match, when others came to “challenge” him,) his strength.

Of course, there were side effects. But such a price would not have mattered to the young man. Consider he began to take the drug while still a child and for a decade imagined, as weights fell upward through his will, as women, (some far older than he,) threw themselves at him and he learned such fascinating things as pain’s features on a woman’s face, as his brother and sister quietly moved out of his way, never speaking, never once looking him in the eyes again, out of fear of what he’d do, of what his parents would allow him to do, nothing mattered about the day to come, only the day that was.

It was the final match that ultimately undid him. It had been known for years before what the drug did, how it strengthened, and what the cost would be. But as I said such costs do not enter into the equation of a child.

Perhaps his family knew at the end. It is known they were

there, his older brother with his arm broken in six places, his sister with her cut mouth while the young man smiled at her; she didn't smile back. I imagine he must have felt quite immortal that day. Stranger things have happened.

The final test of his strength was in a wide circular auditorium. Gathered about him were five or six other men, young, bristling of muscles. He went first, easily gathering up half a ton of weight, his body shuddering with anticipation as it gracefully rose all that tonnage.

The weight was a solid piece of steel, black and shaped like a pyramid with its top half gone. It was meant to be as awkward to pick up as humanly possible; still, it yielded easily. That morning, he had mentioned casually to his mother how easy things had been, how finally everyone was looking at him. Her concussion of course made it difficult for her to understand. Still, he had ordered her to watch. She had obeyed.

As he lifted the weight he stared at them, contemptuous, proud, knowing that they would all know his name. And as he lifted it, he first felt it, the stiffness in his body. The weight fell behind him and he staggered a moment.

No one of course came to his aid. Some, most, knew the ultimate fate and he looked into his father's eyes and there was no trace of empathy there. The older man looked at his son with a cool cunningly blank expression, the way certain children look at flies as their wings are torn off.

It's hard to say whether young Albert deserved his fate, or his family, considering what his family had done to him before his change "to adulthood," or if some casually cruel remark had not been said, if some desire for lasting notice had been unexpressed how his life would have differed. But all things happened as they happened and strength had made him what he was, or at least provided the means.

So, he staggered and then he started to freeze. Eventually,

the doctors came, and not long after he was taken to hospital. They told him his body was slowly stiffening. The process took over two weeks as each muscle hardened slowly.

No one came to see him during that time.

I'd like to think his last moments were spent on reflecting on the choice he'd made and how he would have done things better, been more humane if he had been given a second chance.

But I am only speculating.

After two weeks his body was paralyzed and he required machines to breathe and keep his heart working. Then and only then his parents came. They were given the option to end his life but they said no; in fact, they made a point that he live a long, long, long life, fully conscious.

They then carefully, methodically talked about their son to the public, had posters of him made, showcasing the dangers of the drug, pointing out how this and this alone, (they stressed that they were loving parents and before the change had always, always, always treated their son the best that they knew how,) had made him violent toward them, and others.

So, Albert Rauen became the embodiment of the movement to ban the drug which gained him his strength to get revenge on those who he thought deserved it. Some even believe that his parents eventually propped their boy up in a park as a living statue, living proof of the dangers of the drug. But there is only circumstantial proof of that.

Though he lived another twenty years Albert Rauen's life ended when his strength ended him. After that, he was a prop, used and abused by others but some can argue his life then changed little before the drug and after the drug ultimately failed him.

At any rate his name is known and his life documented. At least the life that anyone cares about. He was twenty years old.

SAFE HOUSE

These are the games the people play. These are the things we do to stay alive.

Firstly, when a child is born, they must be placed in the ovens with their mothers for a time and when they are finally calmed can they be taken out again. During labour, there are freezers where they can give birth and cry to their heart's content.

Secondly, none may cry out in the sacred places. This is the sum of the first two laws. One may whisper but one may never cry out.

Thirdly, when leaving one must dress as the enemy.

Fourthly, when foraging in the wilderness one must slow their steps, stumble and fall, and never ever run. If the enemy notices you still you mustn't run but stagger your steps, slowly, softly, and if they come to you, curious, hungry, still act like them, keep your eyes down, groan and sputter and stalk the empty streets and even if they bite you, even if you bleed and die still must you pretend and so save the others from facing a similar end.

Fifthly, those who know each other intimately may never leave at the same time, lest the sight of a lover dying cause the other to cry out, or scream.

Sixthly, when possible, the enemy must be destroyed but never with a gun, or fire. Only a knife. For a knife makes no noise and the enemy must never hear a sound.

Seventhly, one must take one's own life in one's hands every moment of every day. The community must survive. Each individual is expendable.

These truths we are taught from our earliest childhood. These are the games the people play. These are the things we do to stay alive.

I have walked in the wilderness. I have dressed as the enemy and the streets were littered with grass and I have stumbled and fallen and my fingers seemed to be broken and I crawled forward a time and then

stumbled to my feet again.

I saw the trees which pushed through the houses and the houses clustered about each other and within I heard the sounds of the enemy. They shuffled and I watched out of the corner of my eye through windows like dead eyes as they gripped objects, forks, knives, reenacting the lives of the people, though they no longer had lives.

Ahead of me were more of the people, shuffling the streets, and the day dragged on, hour followed hour, and we crossed the street and returned to the safe house in the evening. We had found a few scrapes of food and the children ate first to assuage their hunger and we followed and during the night we felt the rough fingers of the enemy scrawling at the walls.

And we cannot cry out or scream. I watch the faces of the people shudder at each soft scraping of fingernails against walls and we sleep, though we rarely dream. And in my dreams, I am pursued by them, if I have dreams, and sometimes I turn and fight, but they slowly swarm from the homes of the dead and my knife grows black with blood. But still, they come.

I cannot remember the time before. Some believe we had names once but I do not know. Some believe the cities and the streets we created but again I cannot be sure for I have lived this way all my life in the safe house and the people here have huddled together so long we have imagined ourselves a warren, hiding in the dark.

There is man-with-scar-along-right-cheek. There is woman-missing-left-hand and these people we have known but we do not use names, for names imply we are individuals and we are not. We are simply part of something greater. We are not meant to imagine ourselves as individuals. We are the people and that is all we are.

After twenty years of listening to scrawling fingernails, of staggering from stone to stone along bleeding streets the world has shrunk to the size of a few acres of land and the safe house which is the only world I know.

We do not even speak but write in cramped letters and words one

to another. I have scoured books to learn the words to speak but I cannot imagine so much of what I've read. I know there are words like "fiction" and so imagine names are this, cities as described are this, some dream written down to help protect the sanities of those who first encountered the enemy.

But I am growing unsure.

The enemy is dying. I have watched as their greying bodies slowly rupture along the ground. Once they numbered in their thousands, but gradually, they have rotted away. I have seen hands float on a pool of maggots and realized the hands were torn off, not by animals, but by simple decay.

And today I shouted. I do not know why but I shouted and girl-with-burnt-face would have stared at me in horror but she continued to stagger on. And then I shouted again. It was a vast piercing sound and no enemy came. The houses were still, the peeling paint like moths' bodies floated about and the enemy did not appear.

And then I took a step. I took a long purposeful step and nothing happened. The streets were empty of everything except us and we were alone and not even the hint of them was left except as dead hands and maggot-flesh.

And we returned and girl-with-burnt-face wrote of what I'd done but I added the enemy did not come. And that night for the first time in twenty years there was no rough scrawling of fingernails against stone.

The next day I walked into the sunlight still dressed as the enemy but the houses were quiet. The world was still. And we had known or felt the gradual lessening of them, but no one said anything, no one wanted to say anything. Because these are the games the people play. These are the things we do to stay alive. And suddenly the world shifted and no one knew what to do.

I didn't know. I was so used to the way of things I continued to stumble then caught myself, tried to walk as I did in the safe house but

couldn't. So used to walking like the enemy I had to train myself to walk like one of the people in the light.

And I came back to the safe house and within I realized the people still huddled and the babies did not cry for they could not do such things. And out beyond, amid graveyards and cemetery ground where others of the people lingered dressed as the enemy in rotting clothing and skin, where they had but tombs as safe houses and mausoleums, even if they knew the enemy was gone still the rules would linger in their minds. And perhaps in another twenty years, the rules would slightly bend.

But these are the games the people play.

These are the ways we keep ourselves alive.

THE TIGER

His name. Once he had known it, remembered it, but it had been so long ago. Or had he never had a name before now? There was a strange gap in his mind, his memories like an empty gaping wound somewhere in the back of his consciousness.

He was sitting now. Sitting here but where was here? The chair was warm, soft skin of leather and he was in the corner of a room. It was ornate and scarlet, and he had a sudden hunger at the thought of scarlet somehow, as if the two concepts were connected in his mind.

Across the far wall were books, leatherbound, placed neatly on a shelf. Behind glass. Beside the shelf was a massive globe. He noted the geography idly as if in indecision if what he saw he truly understood. He stood up then on oddly shaking legs uncertain of his gait as if he were missing something in his stride. He crossed the room, crossed the ornate spiderweb pattern of the carpet, and gazed at the globe a moment before turning to the books. The world seemed unfamiliar to his eyes and yet he knew the names of each landmass. He did not know how he knew, or why.

The books were sealed behind glass and a lock. He reached instinctively into his coat pocket and found a key, a twisted piece of metal arranged almost in the likeness of a beast's claw. Then he glanced back, realizing it was just an ordinary key, put it into the lock, and drew out a book to read.

He returned to his chair and opened the novel. Idly he read awhile, though he could not remember ever learning to read.

The novel was written from the perspective of a doctor. He was working in the English countryside attempting to augment other forms of life. He began by working on insects, gradually changing what they were into something else. He had described

how he had turned small beetles closer into creatures like human beings, but they seldom survived long.

Often, for some reason he could not understand, some portion of their former selves clung to them. They would escape from his terrarium in the basement and he would find them littered at various spots along the ground, often in the soft warmth of a carpet.

Each one had somehow committed suicide.

Considering them a failure he had moved on to dogs. They proved better able to survive the change. He noted how one had gradually become almost a woman, her form closer to what he desired though he was preoccupied with creating a male specimen. Still, she had proven useful to him, in so many ways.

He read on, describing the doctor's interest in his creation but his agenda was the same; to create, or rather recreate his son who had died in a great war. For he believed it was possible with the right tools and the right education to transform anything into what one wished, to erase death itself and give life another form.

The dog died.

She had aged in five years thirty. He had described her body slowly falling away, the rough edges of her skin breaking like glass, and down in the fields he buried her. And then he continued with his experiments. He never mentioned her again.

Nor did he mention how he had acquired the tiger, some great ravenous beast who had mauled two men. This creature he took to his estates and began again his great work, down in the basement.

For a moment the man looked up. The door to the right of the shelf was visible, an oaken door equally ornate, and he went over to it and opened it. It seemed to lead directly into shadow but he seemed somehow to see. There were stairs leading down.

Down into the basement.

Without thinking he descended the stairs.

In the basement's lightless world, he was able to glimpse everything. There was an odd afterglow as if his eyes were always accustomed to the dark. There was a table, equipment he didn't understand, and a smell. A familiar odour. His mouth watered but he held himself in check and returned upstairs.

It had taken many months, many surgeries. The beast's body had been reformed, but the mind was crucial too. He had developed certain drugs to increase the beast's intelligence and he began to read to it there in the cage in the basement below.

He taught it words, phrases, a whole history of everything. Of everything relating to his son.

Gradually claws became hands. Gradually fangs became teeth. Gradually fur turned to hair. The beast growled and then one day it said his name. Ecstatic the doctor reveled in his new child, in the almost-man. He loved him as a son.

And more than a son.

Eventually, he found his new child clothes to wear.

Eventually.

But there was still some portion of the beast left. The doctor noted how his child mentioned the roar of some creature across the moors. He said it was his imagination but his child was not so sure.

Dressed in the right suits, speaking the right tongue, the doctor believed eventually he would utterly become his son. And then that night the thunderstorm struck . . . there was nothing else.

The man glanced up behind him at the window. He turned back to the novel and then realized for the first time it was written by hand. The hand was familiar, yet he had not noticed it before.

And then just for a moment, the man glanced down at the carpet and something caught his eye. A strange jewel was there, buried in the scarlet and gold fabric. He went over and picked it up and then he returned to his chair, the book nestled like a sleeping animal to one side.

He studied the jewel then. It was oddly elongated and he realized it had six, no, four small juttings emanating from it. They were like little tapering pieces of green and he understood it was a beetle he was looking at; its shell had seemed a jewel to his eyes.

Then he turned it over and almost screamed. Its face was not the face of a beetle but of a man. It appeared like a man's face and the limbs were human limbs, distorted and broken. Its body held small patches of skin intermingled with its own former armour and he gazed in agony at its features. They were his own.

And he was struck by the sound of a roar coming from far away, a great tiger's scream, and knew the voice he heard was his own, the ghost of his former self coming back to haunt him finally. Come back home again.

He was the tiger he had read about. He was the almost-man.

And then he noticed the door, not the one to the basement but to the right of him. It was a bedroom he knew and he went to it and opened it. To reveal the bloody scene.

His father's body had been eviscerated, cut, severed, and torn. His face was somehow untouched, the image of an old man, wizened and withered and grief-stricken. Even in death in that white room, there was no trace of fear or rage, just a deepening sadness as his son had reverted to his former form and tore his prey apart. There on the bed, the naked old man lay broken and unkept, tossed aside as the younger man forgot everything about his former self. Save that he was a man.

And for a moment the younger man imagined a small dog upon an operating table as the doctor applied all his skills to

change her until finally one day she might whisper *father* to him, and then, closing the door the young man went to the chair and sat in it, still as glass.

He sat and closed his eyes and a moment later opened them again.

He was sitting in a chair. Sitting here but where was here? He did not know again.

THE SKELETON

My name is John. I am thirty-four. I am married. I am going mad. I am going to kill my wife. I need you to understand why.

I don't know when it started for me. I don't have an exact moment when it began. There are dreams sometimes when I was small, watching my parents flicker into and out of . . . *something*. We had a small house, white picket fence, two bedrooms, and I'd listen to them . . . doing things in the dark.

I had this terrible dream. Perhaps, yes, perhaps it was when I first came across the idea but I can't be sure. Like I said, I don't really know.

But the dream is of them, these rough giants, and suddenly my father's face peers close and the skin bleeds away, becomes like taunt paper broken in several spots, and the more I look the more it bleeds.

Suddenly I'm staring at red flesh and my father's eyes peering out from it and I'm screaming and he doesn't know why. And I turn to my mother and her face seems broken a deeper shade of red, as I watch each blood vessel on her face pulse.

Sometimes this dream and the other one come together and I'm standing in their doorway watching them beneath the sheets as their faces flicker from living bodies to red pulp and back, faster and faster . . . sometimes the dreams come together.

As I grew older, I began a study of skeletons.

I knew each bone in my face, fearful lest I look to a mirror and see just white teeth and hollow eyes staring back. You see, as time passed the flesh dissolved. First, I'd watch the children I knew melt like ice in the sun, leaving their skins hanging along the ground until only the pulp under the skin remained, and

they'd laugh at me as I turned and ran away.

But gradually more and more dissolved.

I'd watch blood vessels stream behind the girls I liked like scarlet threads. Whenever one of them would get close and the scent of the car turned from leather to skin, I'd watch as her face peeled away and blood vessels hung from her jaw until I couldn't look away and closed my eyes inside my mind hoping somehow not to see.

It's strange to imagine a decade passing, going from a child to a young man, going from watching children call curses on you to groping and being groped by women in the backseats of cars.

The only consistency in my life was watching the people I knew fall apart.

And my parents died.

I met my wife eventually and I steeled myself as she crossed the aisle, bloody and raw, and the nerves I felt which everyone assumed came from the normal concerns of a young man. I suppose in a way that was true if every young man had the same fears I did.

How was I wed? Looking back, I can't tell or explain. I was charming when I needed to be. In her company, I said perfect things. I knew her love of flowers, and where to touch her skin, I spoke of children she wanted I never wanted to have.

So, we were wed.

I never spoke to anyone of the dreams. I didn't want to be considered a monster after all. But when I was thirty-four things came to a head. And I finally understood what had been happening to me.

I felt the impact before I knew what happened. I was driving home from work and a car crashed sideways into my own. I gazed at a sky black like human fat and felt my left arm shatter

and noticed casually as the metal warped and burst. I knew I was going to die.

I felt the blood ooze out from myself and then gazed upward at the mirror as a grinning smile of white teeth *spoke to me*. I heard my own teeth calling to me.

I could not be mistaken.

I heard a strange whispering sound and then noticed my skull in reflection. It jerked forward and I did the same. Gazing down I noticed as my legs stiffened and then my broken arm reached to the door and pushed, as I screamed.

My ribs, felt them push, each one suddenly flexible as a snake, as my seatbelt was cut. My ribs had pushed through my own skin severing the seatbelt and with my broken arm piercing the door open my legs, acting on their own volition, swaggered outward to the street.

And I heard my teeth calling for help, using my own voice as I realized they were also speaking to me. And then I passed out from the pain, but as I heard later, I kept walking until I reached the sidewalk, and only then collapsed.

Later at the hospital doctors fixed my arm and ribs. I was suspended in limbo, half-mad from the pain, unconscious but still able to listen as they spoke. My bones knew I could hear them but I always must have been able to perceive them in a way.

I glanced inward to see my skull reflecting upon the situation they were in. Each portion of my skeleton was part of some parliament acting in concert. But I never noticed it.

We never notice it.

We never notice when our actions seem not our own. For that is them, twisting our muscles acting as if we chose it when it was always them there below. In my unconsciousness I must have imagined what was happening and what they were. As I awoke to see my wife's smiling face, I could only see her bones. Nothing

else of her was left. I even heard my skeleton whispering something to her own.

So that was when I planned on killing her.

I planned it because they pushed me to it, to her, and what did I know about her? She was tall and lovely and attractive, an architect, good with children, (ah, children, that was what they were after with me and her,) and nothing else. Half the time I even forgot her name. And now her face had become quite invisible to me.

I plotted in secret. A gun or a knife and my bones would know. But, closing my eyes a moment I reached for rat killer in my garden shed after having placed a cup of flour there. They imagined I was holding flour. I poured it into her cup of coffee, placed it back, opened my eyes, fixing them upon the flour, and went across the lawn to our home.

I crossed the threshold, imagining suddenly this house was the same as when I was a small child. I crossed the rooms to where she was and she smiled a grinning skull of a smile and I passed the cup to her and she was about to drink it when something stopped her. I noticed her arm stiffen and the bones in her arm peer up at me with yellow eyes of marrow. It knew and now they knew and now my own skeleton stiffened to attention.

"Are you alright dear?" she asked.

"I'm fine," my teeth said, and I walked outside of the room, my every instinct being to wrap my hands about her throat.

And then I heard my skeleton speaking in concert against my soul.

The skeleton in my mind innocently said that if I tried such a thing again, I would be gone. And I felt a small flicker of bone press against my brain and staring at the mirror just before the threshold leading to the outside watched as the top of my skull collapsed downward just enough to prove what they could do.

Then I went back to my wife and sat and they talked with the skeleton she was, and that was all. That was everything.

I'm writing this to you because you have to understand. We have to fight them somehow, rip the bones out of us to be free. But since I can't live with myself, I am going to kill her. Or rather I am going to try.

And the moment I do, the moment I attempt to put hands around her neck or drop arsenic into her coffee my skull will collapse upon me like a ruined palace and I will die, only to have my body live on like a puppet, manipulated by them, as my teeth whisper to my wife, "I love you," and, assuming she still lives, she will whisper the same thing back to a man who never loved her.

And assuming she is dead, assuming she is nothing more than a suspended mannequin like myself they will be nothing but a pair of skeletons whispering in the dark for no one else to hear but themselves.

THE WOUNDING TOOTH

He was lying on the table and the room was dark. In the moment before true consciousness or fear, before he was aware of the reasons why he thought to himself *I am John Kalkrit and no one can break me.*

A face peered before his own. It was a young man with blond curling hair and blue eyes wearing an expression John had worn many times before, a cold hatred below any mere passion.

This one was determined that John should suffer.

The table slid forward on a pivot and suddenly John was upright. Before him was a screen and etched along the screen an interrogation taking place, a man tied to a chair with John himself "interrogating" him.

Man's right hand was gone and blood trickled down his leg from his missing genitals. And all John kept saying was, "How does it feel?"

And all the time the man kept moaning something.

Then without a single hesitation, John shot the man in the head and said to someone off-screen, "I'll execute one of you a minute until I get what I need. This is what we do to disloyal officers."

"Do you know me?" the young man asked as John finally turned to stare at his jailor.

"No," John said.

Yet John could see the same soft blond curling hair, the same shade of blue in the eyes, the small structure of the cheeks in both his jailor and the man he killed. So. This was his son.

"I know you," the young man said.

"I doubt that," John said.

"Before my mother died, she left this to me, and more."

His mother. Of course. John had taken such special care to rape her at a previous interrogation. She must have acquired the

tapes. The agency had officially been disbanded years ago. John imagined he was probably the last agent left.

"What do you want from me?" John asked.

"I want to know why."

"It was war," John replied, "he was an agent who had betrayed the agency . . ."

"We both know my father didn't betray your precious agency."

A shock of pure pain ran through him then. The table was connected to a battery and the table was metal. John could be electrified with a mere tap of the small black box in the small boy's hand.

"Alright, he didn't betray the agency but we needed to find the ones who did."

"And my mother?"

"I wanted to fuck her and I did, and no one stopped me."

He tried to be as grotesque as possible. In the old agency days, a quick violent death was preferable to a slow agonizing one. If the boy learned anything from his mother John didn't want to live long enough to evaluate the boy's education.

But no shock fired. Not even a hint or flicker of emotion crossed his face. The boy nodded, mostly to himself, but John realized he had some sort of audience. He was staring into the dark corner of the room beyond.

"Do you know how I found you?" he asked John, seemingly out of the blue, as if the question was some sort of myriad answer to the man's horrific motivations.

"No."

The young man then turned from his prisoner toward a door and at the bare door peeling black paint, by this only exit he spoke, without turning back.

"Do you remember the wounding tooth?" he asked.

And John stiffened then.

He swallowed.

"There are no such things left. After the war was over the agency was dismantled and the provisional government came back into power all such *things* were exterminated."

"No," the young man replied simply. "Before my mother was kicked out into the snow to die, naked, she had just enough presence of mind to reach the hatchery, to snatch one of them. Just in case. That's how I *found* you, John. There was never a moment in your life I didn't know where you were."

And without further word, the table slid back causing John to stare at the ceiling as the sound of the door opened and closed. Then the screen became blank leaving only a lone light in the entire room.

He began to panic, struggling at the straps, but couldn't move. He desperately tried to think of something to say, some insult to the young man's mother, and his father, but strangely no words came.

The boy had no right to judge him. Neither of his parents were innocent, but none of that mattered. This was not about justice or revenge. The boy had a wounding tooth, and probably had it his entire life. And if his mother taught him how to use it . . . he heard the soft slide of glass and suddenly saw the world with two pairs of eyes.

He was in a small room, then realized it was a terrarium. The glass had been black and he had not been able to see before. He felt himself climbing. He had practice with this creature but never from this perspective.

The perspective of a victim.

At the lip of the box, he leaned forward, staring at himself upon the table. The box itself rested upon another table, a miniature copy of his own. He dropped to the table noticing the grey metal, feeling it with senses he had not possessed before.

From one table to the other was less than three feet. He jumped, landing upon his own scalp.

He was confronted by a mat of hair idly noticing the scent of sweat. He couldn't scream now or cry out. He wasn't letting himself talk anymore. The more he begged to be allowed to speak the more he was told by himself *No*.

He crawled over his scalp, feeling his legs brushing against his hair, and then was upon his brow, staring into his own eyes. Brown eyes stared into black eyes, his pupils as large as the eyes of the being that he now was, as he crawled along his face.

At the nose, idly, without trying, he slid some bladelike projection across, watching a small sliver of crimson run down his cheek. For some reason, the idea of a nose, of where it was, sickened him now.

Then along the throat noticing behind him as the nose slid off his face; the wound had been cauterized. Thankfully he thought to himself he couldn't scream.

At the throat, listening to the sound of breathing he was suddenly sickened by the idea of him taking an active breath. Then he went along further to the chest, realizing for the first time both of him were naked.

A strange hunger gripped him then. Hadn't noticed it before. Remembered eating worms but now here was the feast he'd been looking for. Bladelike projections plunged out and down, cutting first through the skin, then a few ribs. He spasmed, writhing in agony, but felt no agony at all.

Below the skin he dug inward, under the ribs, burrowing down, listening to the alien sound of a heartbeat as the head raised upward, once, to stare at the face of one silently screaming in utter agony, then with an almost clinical calm it turned back to its labours and slowly started to devour a portion of the victim's lung.

But since the man still lingered on, perceiving reality from

two perspectives even as the heart died John was not dead. Paralyzed now, lying back against the table, unable to move, still seeing the world from this new point of view John watched as lungs were devoured slowly over many days, then intestines, stomach, and finally the body was hollowed out completely.

And still couldn't die.

A single thought sustained . . .

Eight days later the young man entered the room. Outside he had sat at a café and listened to the sounds of those old men who had lost limbs, years, and minds under the former regime. He worked at a hospital building new legs for old, new hands, new eyes. A small child with long metallic fingers had put her hand in the hand of the young man, silently thanking him for all that he had done.

And each night he turned to the radio listening for any hint that John Kalkrit's disappearance was noticed. But it never was. The man had disappeared, and in his absence, no one remembered him. He had only mattered to himself. His disappearance did not affect the rest of the world at all.

Eight days later the young man went inside.

The body was hollowed out by now. The wounding tooth still lingered in the wound. He noticed the pulsing rhythm of its movements under the skin and after putting on specially made leather gloves reached into the hollowed man's body and pulled the creature out.

Eight spindling legs writhed and its long black hair bristled unnaturally as two broad and oddly intelligent eyes peered up at him. And all the time two small tendrils jutted just below the head revealing daggerlike projections impotently trying to cut the leather skin. It was trying to return to its former home.

The young man gazed at it lovingly then went over to the

box and dropped his pet in. And as the lid was placed over it, stealing it in darkness, still it whispered to itself *I am John Kalkrit and no one can break me.*

THE CLOAKED SERPENTS

The stony desert is beyond the limits of their kind. They linger in the dark and cool, coming out only upon opened spaces embedded in high cliff towers as the oceans of heat roar about them.

Down in the cool they linger, raise their young, the males struggling upward, the females struggling the same, and nakedly they lie together, the only whisperings of heat in the down-below.

And I watch and I marvel at the frailty of their kind.

The palace of mists and rains, the palace of a thousand birds; I have learned of these places their ancestors spoke of. I have tried to imagine rain, the pattering of soft granules of water, tried to imagine how the world was cooled beneath the sky, and how the term ocean referred not to heat but water. And yet these things I barely understand.

Nor can I understand forest or jungle. I try to imagine green but the colour eludes me. I know how it is described, life-giving, warm, and soft, but the only warmth I know is the blazing of heat and the body warmth of the others in the down-below.

And birds? Even they do not know the word. It describes a flutter of wings and a mouth writ sharp with strange claws and cries they call songs but it means no more to me than this passage I have read.

*Books like autumn leaves, lying, fluttering,
burnt, and scattered on the ground.*

I am confronted by the image of wings and feathers by imagining sand cooled to these shapes, patterned as our mothers would pattern stone to rippling gardens. And books? Another

passage describes books like wings, so I try to imagine their connection, but the fluttering . . . fluttering of what? One of the older ones mentions pages, himself reclining against the stones far in the cliff villas, far from the oceans of heat below.

His skin is withered and weathered and when I ask, he mentions once that his grandfather spoke of pages, each sheet of paper bound together, but of paper he knows nothing himself.

He knows not what it means.

Autumn is the most striking word of all though, to me.

Dancing with blades the purple dragon serpent queen of Myurrrh arrays herself upon the sands. Beside her is the shadow stalker blade-born man or rather one of my people's interpretations of they who dwell in the down-below.

He is wearing a worn-out skin which once they wore which once belonged to them. If one of them died and his or her skin was finely preserved, we'd trade for it, provide daqrque root, or some other amenity. Often though we received the skin for free. After death, (unless caused by disease,) they would be fed upon. There are no places to bury nor can they be left upon the sands, nor burnt. They can but be consumed as we consume our own.

She is dancing, the small curved sharpening blades of bone in each hand and Akulet is beside her, wearing another's skin. It is difficult to do so for they have two tails as opposed to one but we have had many years of practice changing their forms to match our own.

At a crucial part of the dance as her arms are raised, he comes forward and in the swaying motion of the dance slides his tongue along the bridge of her nose. The blade falls toward him, he catches it, the sand about sinuously, rhythmically curls and shifts, and it is over. Then we go our separate ways, except for myself. I linger a time and watch the pair depart.

The ceremony is just a small part of the day's festivities.

The sands of Equilcaura have been shifting about, and the hardened ground slowly beginning to melt, a sign of the changing season as fine dust begins to swell upward from below.

Soon we will return to the great cliffs again. Soon we will dwell far from the oceans of heat and linger with them in the down-below for soon the sand will become impossible to cross. Soon any will sink who venture upon its face.

I watch the pair of them crawl upon the sands, he like those we have taught, she an image of a form we worshipped centuries ago. Then we knew nothing of our brethren; we believed we were alone.

Then they came.

I gaze upward at the sky and imagine the burning meteor, the crashing fire, and the few strange strangers wandering out into the deep ocean of the heat where even we rarely tread.

And we came forth. They were terrified of us but delirious from the ocean they could not fight back and we took them into the cities of our nests. How many died before communication was made, I do not wish to know.

Gradually we came to understand them.

They spoke of places that we later learned were worlds. They spoke of the great void and the night and the stars. The old ones, those who had known of the far places spoke gradually with a longing hunger for green, for snow, for oceans not of heat but blue waves of water. But these things we did not know.

I crawl along the sand to my home.

I climb the sheer cliffs and below watch as the pair become grey shadows of form until they are indistinguishable one from another. Soon they will climb to the stony shores of another mountain, soon he will shed the skin of the dead and she will shed her own.

I reach the topmost villas of my home.

Into the mountain, my ancestors had carved the great labyrinths and tunnels and under-places for our young to shelter them when the heat outnumbered all else but itself. When the others came, they could not survive the heat, could but linger here, though, at the topmost spires they would dwell, far from the inferno of the ground.

Some had been architects and engineers and they modified the doorways and upper reaches. Where two hundred years before the villas had been formed in the likeness our ancestors had preferred now great pillars and colonnades exist, the semblance of some lost region whose name they had forgotten.

Beside the villa, the mountain continues upward like a ziggurat thrown against the stars. In one of the great caverned openings, there sits one playing upon a daliqueria, an instrument I know well.

"Ah, Saryas," he says, his skin withered but beneath it, his muscles seem like iron, "how was the festival below?"

"It was fine Turiq," I say and curl up beside the old man. I stare behind me a moment, watching the sky, for this far up I cannot see the ground, the mountain blocking all views except the way I came.

"Soon your people will return into the caverns," he says. I nod. "It is good. It has been too long since your people have been away."

"How fares the down-below?" I ask.

"It is well. The children are strong, the walls bleed moisture, the fertile conceive, the young fight."

"And you?"

"Ah, I use the daliqueria, I sing the old songs," referring to my people's own, "I tell the old stories to teach the young the way of things. The way we were, the way we are, the way we may yet be."

"It is good," I say then curl to a far corner by the

mountain's side and think. He does not turn toward me. He continues playing. I hear the strings made from the intestines of one of my own people, (or one of his own,) and try to imagine the season to come.

I imagine my people coming forward, crawling from the deep oceans of heat up into the stony places then returning downward into the earth among those who dwell forever in the down-below.

I imagine the corridors of stone, the great caverns of the nests, the crying mews of infants, the cracking of eggshells as other infants are born, and suddenly I stop and try to think of all this another way.

I try to imagine the language of my people before they arrived. I try to imagine the words they used and the phrases from the time before. Some, a few of the oldest ones remember the former names but the language has changed so much in two centuries. The words I speak my ancestors did not speak before.

Then I turn to Turiq, listening to his song, knowing the words he used his ancestors had not, nor these thoughts, for so much was lost here above, and in the down-below. He turns back in wonder at my sudden silence, for the scraping of my scales has stopped.

"Anything amiss old friend?" he asks.

I cannot answer for a moment.

"I am just trying to imagine an autumn day," I reply.

He sighs in sympathy and mentions he had likewise done the same. Many times.

Then he continues onward with his song, at first some ancient dirge then begins to sing of the heat and the oceans of sand, of the dancers and the down-below where the young fight, where moisture scales the walls, where the women are fertile and the caverns cool, and as the soft rippling bodies of my people are heard ascending the mountain's side I know we are content.

THE CLIFF

We build the wall. Every day my father, brothers and I are tasked with the cliff and shoreline and every day *they* make another attempt.

Their writhing-wrapping bodies have tried to pull us down into them many times. They latch onto legs, arms, and if you go down you have exactly seven seconds to cut yourself free. One second after that the rest of them cluster about and once you're in the water they swarm down your throat, ripping you inside out, pulling at you until everything you were is out there on the water, sustaining them.

Only twice have they pulled one of us into the mass of themselves. Cilrrol who in his carelessness crept too close and suffered the scream last, for that is all that remains, echoing sound crushed by their weight.

Cirrek too fell, though he did not fall to them, so much as plunged into their midst. And that is the reason for my story.

We were on a colony ship sent to occupy this ground. While en route we slept and dreamed and among each, the other's dreams were known. As such each individual was a miniature portion of the whole, a useful collective existing without excess. This meant that before arriving the colony was already intrinsically bound so conflict should not exist.

This had the added benefit of creating individuals who were used to the hardship of existing as pieces of a whole.

Being in this state our minds gravitated together a great subconscious mass of thoughts and desires, each one not only part of the whole but intimate to the others to an extent the conscious mind was incapable of achieving.

So, when we came to Remerymia with its violet sun like a tear in the black sky, with its oceans and rocky isles, we were

prepared to act as one in everything. And our job was the wall.

There were thirty of us whose purpose was to build the stone works, cut with a fire-infectious-disease the native kelp into retreat, and if need be, act as the walls themselves.

We struggled daily against it. We struggled for each day the kelp would acidlike burn against the stone works and we in turn with fire would burn at them. Day to night or rather dawn to dusk this was our purpose without fail.

This was the sum of our lives.

I worked upon the wall and to each side of me were Uluketh and Enuij and Enuesj and written on their faces was the same determination as my own. But eventually, things began to break down.

The trouble began when Cirrek couldn't obey the orders given. Out of us, he was the only one to truly find the planet difficult to tolerant. In our dreams, his fear of the ground and sky was primal, a throwback to an earlier moment in his life.

We all knew it for we knew him just as he knew us.

In the middle of the Illyaudi on Ascalyar he had become stranded in the barren patches of alien ground.

That planet was mostly jungle, great rivers of trees, oceans of grass-forests, and his ancestors had dwelled there for untold centuries. They dwelled in the closed off sealed and hidden structures of the dusk, suffocating spaces of rooms halfway into night, closed fast and tight, multitudes all together crowded in cities not of stone. I never understood why he had decided to leave after the nightmare in the Illyaudi.

For this was the empty land and he had found himself trapped there. As a child he imagined he had wandered from the jungle to see the outer side of the world though in dreams it is difficult to understand how he managed this, logic does not run the same in dreams, but he imagined himself not as he was but as he was before, child cradling himself rocking back and forth as the

emptiness swelled and swayed and the forest loomed to each side and in his blind panic he was frozen to the ground.

This was the dream.

And when we sought colonists, he chose himself and counted himself as one of us even though I could not understand his choice. For now, a second barren ground presented and a second ocean of grass and trees just below the water's skin, and when the order came to burn the kelp away, he in his terror couldn't. He stood frozen and when I burnt at them, torching them into the scent of charred sea-wet grass he attacked me.

Anger exploded and I was cut but Father stopped him and sullenly he strode away. And that, none of it, was supposed to happen.

As I said, the point of the sharing was for all things to work seamlessly together. We were the builders and the idea of one attacking another shouldn't have happened. Sometimes I suspect the dream was more prophetic than past tense, not a memory of what was but a state of his truest self. But one cannot trust the logic of a dream.

That night we returned to the colony. Our caste name was Olwuen, or builder. As we strode forward the Olwujen, the doors, stopped us. Hard-woven into the walls which had been woven from an organic resin the flat-bodied Gaznejh and Illyanaija greeted us.

In truth, they stood behind the doors but their role was to keep the walled city safe and just as our function was to become the walls to brace against the kelp, theirs were the doors.

They appeared to be carved of ivory and save for their blue-within-blue eyes scattered over their bodies one might not be able to tell they were alive.

Tendrils licked from off their second skin probing us. Then they slid to the side and we entered past great circular walls the colour of our enemies. The kelp was always present in our

thoughts you see.

On most worlds, colonization was not difficult.

Some colonists came to worlds without intelligent life.

Others came to worlds where the sentient life was friendly.

Sometimes even the native species were hostile but usually hostility was a short-lived affair. Given time to communicate differences dissolved and bled away. Not so here.

The kelp could not be reasoned with. All communication died. In the past colonists had arrived and their soft-ruptured bodies had sustained the kelp but it had been hoped our collective would be more adaptable. We were wrong.

They were the rarity, a sentient species obsessed with the destruction of another for no purpose. For though they fed we learned they did not need to feed. We were not their food, but their entertainment.

High overhead the Stryagages caste wheeled. Composed of sixteen membranous wings the raven-smooth bodies of the scouts circled and probed, eying all directions equally with their three heads.

And here the Jaltryagages, the roads we walked upon, a caste designed to be roads and streets designed to exterminate the kelp should they reach this far in. I came to the rounded room of my home, crawled to the middle of the darkness, and the Etdehcao, the food caste, slid forward sluglike and sliced a portion of herself away to feed me. We had learned the native fauna and flora were inedible. We had to bring our own.

And in all things, in each caste, the forms given were but an outer shape and our human forms were buried beneath to return to the former state we were. These bodies were tools, even the form I used in the outer world as I crawled from the shell of obsidian and the spindling legs and Leveinueja slid from her sluglike form and with her translucent pale white skin slept beside me in our bed awhile.

And I too slept.

The next day we returned to the wall and the kelp. During the night they slept, their bodies incapable of motion in the dark. We could attack them then but our own flesh needed rest as well so the war continued day after day, unending in each one's struggle, our purposes the same.

I remembered how I awoke and the dawn greeted me and Leveinueja was already returned to her other state, the translucent form of the food caste healed. I was assigned her and vice versa. Her body was able to replenish itself with solar energy. But the cost was her other body was too soft, too weak to maintain the wall so I protected the city and she protected me through her flesh, just as each caste worked to safeguard the all.

Such was the way of things.

And here at the wall, the new day begun, our crawl from inland to the edge where the dark sea-wet forests were, I saw Cirrek already there. He had returned in the night after we had gone.

Father came to him, taller than the rest of us and he was about to speak when Cilrrol edged too far forward toward the edge, desperate to give Cirrek some company, some reassurance then. And at that moment the kelp struck. One moment he was among us, the next gone. Eight seconds later the scream.

It was a high-pitched wail as the kelp probed and struck inward beneath his artificial diamond skin, as his true body ruptured and he was dragged backward, outward and we stared in mute horror as he died. Then the fire, the flames, the kelp driven back and I turned to see Cirrek as he leaped after Cilrrol and died as well.

Had the loss of one caused the other? Cirrek was no closer to him than to I or anyone. Perhaps he had simply been driven to seek out the ocean for it resembled most strongly the ocean of the

green.

Perhaps we'll never know.

There was nothing else to do. Father gave command and we got to work. There were holes formed by their incessant attack and we let loose the fire-infectious-plague which licked and bled into them but they just kept coming, wave after wave of them but by the end as the day came down about us, they were in full retreat. Without the day the kelp not only slept but stopped.

Exhausted we returned to the city of our dreams.

In thoughts turned to terror, I came upon his thoughts. A fragment of his dream, his final one I think I saw. As I lay in bed, my former obsidian body squatting crustaceanlike in the middle of the room, her sluglike form slung beside it I dreamed again of the forest.

I imagined myself among all the ocean of the green, each one not merely a tree but a form identical to myself. I then imagined the kelp, each strand like a tree, a blade of grass a form, each person an ocean of flesh.

And he was there among them and for a moment I could see him imagining the kelp sliding over the wall possessing each of us, turning us into them, a great long-suffering sea of eternity, lapping waves the same as the wind upon the grass had been to him. And then the drowning and the end.

I awoke with a start, looked down to Leveinueja and her translucent pale skin, her blond hair curling upon the pillow, scanned the rounded room, looked to the door as the moonlight of a foreign moon flooded in, and turned once more to the barren skin of my other flesh, the obelisk I rode within, the eight spindling legs, so spiderlike. And I imagined for a moment the barrenness of that other flesh to one unused to anything but the ocean of the green.

I couldn't rest.

MOUSE AND TREE

Mouse lived by Tree in the forest. Mouse's Tree was special to him because Mouse's Tree could talk. Mouse would say, "How are you?" and Tree would say, "I'm fine."

Mouse's Tree was very big. It seemed like it covered the whole world and the whole sky. But that was only because Mouse was very small.

Mouse went out into the forest looking for nuts. Mouse found nuts under various trees, gathered them up and brought them home. Tree was happy. Tree said "I am happy."

Mouse was happy too.

Mouse watched the stars at night, and Moon. He wanted to go there but he didn't know how. His fur quivered as he slept, and dreamed he was on Moon looking down at the world below, looking at himself. But when Mouse awoke, he was very sad.

One day a bronze witch entered the forest. She was very tall and shiny. She was made of metal and she had a mask in her hand and when she put the mask on, she could become anyone who had ever lived.

Mouse asked her, "Who are you?"

"I am the bronze witch," she said. Then she put on her mask and she was a little girl.

"Who are you?" Mouse asked.

"I am a little girl," she said, "looking for my daddy."

In a flash, she had become the girl's father.

"I am her father. I am looking for my daughter."

"I saw your daughter just a second ago," Mouse said, "but she is gone."

The bronze witch wandered the green forest paths trying on face after face but each one was looking for someone else. Mouse thought she was very peculiar and he went on his way.

Alfred Red the black bird stared down at him as he walked. Red lived in the marshes and the tall grass by the rivers but he was here now staring at his friend.

"Hello Mouse," he said.

"Hello Alfred," Mouse said.

"Did you see a strange thing walking about?"

"Yes, I did, very strange."

"Yes, I thought as much. That was the bronze witch. She is from Before."

"Before what?" Mouse asked. Then Alfred flew off again toward the tall grass, singing as he went.

At Tree Mouse mentioned what Alfred said.

"Alfred is very wise," Tree said, "he lived Before."

"Before what?"

"Before the change. As did I."

Mouse did not understand and so he went to bed.

In his dream, he saw a mouse princess dressed in fine clothes and a dog was protecting her as she crossed a barren land. The dog was brave and strong and he led her to Tree and Tree said "I will protect her and her offspring. You have my word."

And the dog was gone again.

Mouse went to the river to talk to Alfred.

Alfred was sunning himself, his red feathers tufted up, and Mouse asked about his dream.

"That was the time Before," Alfred said, "the time of men."

"What are men?" Mouse asked.

"They look like the bronze witch only there are no more of them."

"What happened to them?"

"I do not know. There was fire and then . . . I do not

know."

"How did you survive?"

Alfred dropped down and opened up his chest. Inside small gears turned then he went up to his perch.

"I am not alive," he said.

Mouse had never thought before that Alfred was not alive. He had a beak, black feathers, and red, and he sang. He seemed alive to him.

Mouse went on his way home again.

That night Mouse stood outside Tree and watched something he'd never seen before. Women were dancing in the sky, dancers in the twilight against the black amber night. They drifted from star to star and he watched them as one reached out a hand and plucked him up, and suddenly he was in their midst.

He was amid the stars.

Then Tree called back to him and the dancer with her long floating hair put him down again and spoke to Tree.

"Are there no other living things left?" she asked.

"No, none," the machine replied, a machine that seemed like a tree even though its bark was harder than steel and it had silver leaves.

"I am sorry to hear that," the dancer said and then she was gone up with the rest of them, as they floated across the sky, and Mouse was very happy. He'd finally been able to go up amid the stars into the night.

CRIMSON

Arkan Sonney drew up from the ground and began to wander. Before this moment it had not existed but it did exist now and because it had been created with hunger it decided to satisfy this strange new need.

Grass tasted unfamiliar and the hedgehog realized it required something else. A worm drew up out of the earth and Arkan realized it had created the worm.

It squirmed and seemed to speak.

"Are you going to eat me?" it asked.

"I am hungry," the pale white hedgehog said.

"I am hungry too," the worm replied. Arkan Sonney considered its creation's words.

"What do you eat?" the hedgehog asked.

"I do not know."

"I believe I am supposed to eat you."

"Please, I only came into being a few moments before."

Pondering this the hedgehog tried again. A second form existed suddenly, the same writhing body, the same small pink flesh. Before it spoke Arkan pounced and devoured it in the second it came into being.

The worm regarded this and pondered what had happened.

"Come with me," Arkan said.

"Will you eat me?" the worm asked.

"I have eaten and if I am hungry, I can make more."

The worm climbed upon the hedgehog's back and did not say if the thought of watching others like itself die in its place troubled it or not.

The pair were in a great forest it seemed yet there were tall blades of grass here. Arkan looked up and saw a bird though he did not know how he knew the name. It was flying backward, the

muscles of its golden wings thrust at an impossible angle, aiming without seeing.

"I am the Oozlum Bird!" it cried. It crashed into a tree and seemed to die. It fell, crumpling to the grass, a golden body, small beak, small wings, small talons and when it touched the grass each green blade bent forward, peering at it curiously.

Then the bones mended and Arkan realized the grass itself had wished the creature life. Carefully it propped back, bones snapping noisily into place as it was about to take off when Arkan called to it.

"Why do you fly thus?" he asked.

"I do not know. I just do. I am the Oozlum Bird."

"I am Arkan Sonney. Come with us."

"And how will I do that?"

"Walk beside me. You will die less easily that way."

And the Oozlum Bird joined the pair.

The forest was dark and shadow-strewn and the grass whispered strange riddles, places, and people Arkan knew but could not understand.

At the centre of the forest was a clearing. The three stepped into the open and above them saw the suns. Three great suns loomed in the sky, one blue, one red, and one yellow. And yet the red sun was the largest. Here the clearing went from green to an oddly crimson shade.

"That is not right," Arkan Sonney said, then caused a worm to appear and devoured it before it could utter a word.

They walked out in the light and noticed a sound. A man was piping some old Celtic song, his voice lilting. They followed the sound.

In the middle of the clearing, they noted Ankou. He seemed a skeleton though he had skin and by him was a lantern and by him was a scythe. And by him was the body of another

man.

He gazed down at the three wanderers and his eyes were not there. His sockets were empty and yet Arkan knew he could see them all too well.

The golden bird hopped to the body of the man. The man's prone form was covered by a pinkish robe and she hopped along his lips.

"Astomi," Ankou said. "I imagined him. He was my companion, my friend. He could not eat food but sustained himself on the scent of grass and trees."

"Why is he dead?" Arkan asked.

"I am Ankou. It is my nature." As if that were answer enough.

Arkan wandered beside Ankou. There by the rounded stone, he sat. The worm lit off Arkan's back and slid beneath the grey rock effortlessly.

By the stone, beside the long black scythe, Arkan spotted a hat.

"Yes," Ankou said, "that too is mine."

The hedgehog stared up at him.

"Did you create the hat?"

"No, like the scythe and the lantern, they are a part of me. They came into existence the same moment I did."

"Will you kill us?" Arkan asked.

"No, that is not a part of my nature."

The Astomi suddenly dissolved like sea foam and the same man wandered into the clearing then.

"Ah, my friend," Ankou said. "I have been expecting you."

Taking leave of them Arkan and the Oozlum Bird fled.

Beyond the clearing a bladder-bird sat by the roots of an ancient oak.

It was formed of a great violet sphere with large wings and

Arkan watched it dip its sinuous neck upward, its thin beak opening to take in air. It was already too large to move and yet it couldn't stop.

The Oozlum Bird went over to it and pecked at a single spot upon its breast. Suddenly the air released out and it slendered into the shape of an ordinary bird. Without thanking her for the wound it rose and flew away.

Beyond the forest lay a river and by the river, Arkan found a ring. It was a small little piece of silver with a crimson jewel atop it. Gazing in he saw a city and within the city were people in appearance like the Astomi and Ankou.

Some gazed up at him as if he were a god. Others fled into the white spires of their homes, fearful of his eyes which seemed like suns blazing in the sky. He turned to the river to notice he had scarlet eyes and then went back but not before gazing upward at the suns.

He placed the ring upon his back as the Oozlum Bird wished for rocks to appear. Crossing their small stone bridge they reached the other side.

They found the grave site then. A small tombstone had been created and the name of someone. Beside the rounded grey stone, an old man's bones were left.

Beside the old man's bones was a man with great enormous feet and a woman with tiny feet. Struthopodes, Arkan realized, though he did not know how he knew the name.

"Hello," the man said, his feet like small hills, broad and thick, changing in size constantly between the two pairs of eyes. To the Oozlum Bird they seemed like thick rounded bricks and Arkan imagined for a moment a wolf's hide and a sudden fear of teeth.

He turned behind himself to see a wolf had entered the

clearing.

The male Struthopode regarded the grey wolf while the woman continued to tend the tombstone, lovingly, methodically brushing the dust away.

“I am hungry,” the wolf said.

“I can create another like myself for you.”

“I am meant for you,” the wolf said, pale eyes rendered crimson regarding his own creator with a strange cold stare. The Oozlum Bird had flown to a nearby branch. The man stood by the bones, and said, “Hello.” He could say nothing else, nor could the woman do anything besides what they had been created for.

As the wolf bit down and crushed his body Arkan ceased to exist. And in that same moment, the wolf ceased to exist as well. The man and woman watched, then went on with their labours again.

THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

There is a hidden language to birds. Not their voices. One would be forgiven for thinking so. Rather their feathers shine in ways we cannot see, their moods reflected in showers of metallic hues.

Ravens become blue cacophonies, silver radiating across like waves of the sea. The most dour sparrows become vibrant cascades, turning forests into seas of shades. Not for our eyes to see nor are birds aware of it.

It is for *Them*.

There is a library of birds where colours are collected the way a painter collects scenes on canvas. They wander in our world, gather these flowing waterfalls, place them under glass, and admire them at their leisure, as if it was all built for them to collect pieces laid out like a farmer tending his orchards, waiting for them to ripen.

I glimpsed this once.

But more horrible than watching the sky and hills be populated by those colours, more horrible than seeing one of *Them* walking amid those waterfalls it had laid was when I looked at my hand and lost consciousness.

The experience only lasted a moment. Not certain what I saw.

Either there was no colour at all meaning *They* do not regard us as anything but an afterthought, tolerated as we tolerate sometimes vermin in our homes.

Or.

Or the colour I saw was so alien even *They* could not perceive it. Can you imagine the terror of knowing you don't even know yourself, and if you tried to at best you would go mad?

THE SOMNOPOLIS

There is a city where everyone sleeps. Streets curl like coral, towers spiral up like ammonite dreams and basking in the warmth of an inland sea, people recline on beds carved of lusting gods, satyrs, centaurs, and sleep.

Emaciated, lips white of cholera, eyes laden with opium. Children are here. How can children be here?

Once had a name. Filled with waking people. But some strange alchemy was cast. Now they drift in eternal sleep.

Only I remain.

Stood upon emptied halls. Imagined their storied voices. Were dancing bodies swaying once to the rhythm of carved bone flutes? Sat by wine-stained waters. Have looked back to staggered towers beckoning with their brilliant bright coral sheen, but I am alone. Cannot sleep or dream.

Have screamed.

Pleaded with old gods. Rest never comes. This is the price, that one takes all waking life while granting all else a blissful oblivion.

I am punished.

I have crossed streets of slumber, imagined slitting the throats of sleepers perched upon their beds of white but cannot find the strength to ruin them.

Though I have the knife.

But now you are here with me. We can sit by the fire, sing songs of old, I can tell you what happened long ago and you will listen, yes you will listen, for the alchemy is strong enough to make me share a portion of it with you. So please do me one favour only. Do not shut out the light.

For you cannot sleep tonight.

THE CURSED OBJECT BECKONS

Her name was Elisandre. She was the woman who was my wife. Still recall her face sometimes but now when I look back at my days before I imagine her melted into glass, features burnished like scarlet tourmaline, clear and veined of blood. And all of this last gift of her form is owed to the carved oblong box she discovered and brought home. To my regret.

Still recall it, images of lusting gods arrayed on each panel and there it was in her hands, she sitting in the scarlet chair, soft as a broken womb, chair in the oaken room and the window pouring sunlight down on her, her face alone in shadow then.

She had arrived from a far distant place and during her travels had acquired the box, which she seldom spoke of, save that she wouldn't let it out of her grasp.

And all the time I feared but I didn't know what I feared until that morning, staring at my wife that last time.

The night before she had slipped from her bed going downstairs, taking the box with her and the weight of it I felt no longer pressed upon me, so for the first night in many nights I had a proper sleep.

Before no matter what I did my limbs never felt right. I sat at dinner and my legs seemed misshapen or when walking the rhythm of my steps was off, as if at one moment a leg was longer and the next shorter.

I glanced into a mirror and didn't recognize my face.

It wasn't human but I could never retain the image long enough to know its shape. Its race.

And all the time she kept the box close to her and sometimes I'd glance at her and she'd seem unnatural. Her skin glistened like oil and her eyes . . . sometimes it seemed she had more than she should have.

Then came that night and her descending the stairs and our tiny circular home was cut in half, the upper half where I slept granted peace, bed and blankets suddenly normal things, mirror in the distant corner of the room revealing when I awoke just my own face.

But below everything was changed.

I crept down the brown stairs and felt the scent of burning water in the air.

The tables and chairs in the corner by the window were shifting and scattering and pooling upward and growing bones, and hair. And teeth.

I slipped to the sunroom and she was there.

Mostly there.

The shadows where her face was parted then, and I beheld her skin was translucent, now like glass with fine veins showing blood pooling about her face.

And she glanced up at me and with hands now made of clay she offered me the box but before I could shatter it a voice crept up inside the backward labyrinths of my mind.

Obediently I took the box and went outside to stand upon the green hills and it was there. The creature. It had three legs and three arms arranged in a circular form about its body and with the tendrils of a hand took the box and subtly explained.

Then was gone.

As was my wife with it.

I'll never forget the certainty that I had been left behind.

For the box would destroy any not designed for it and had already obliterated my wife. Her soul, her smile was gone and only clay and glass remained. She would be taken upward by them and healed the best they could but would never return for her memories of me were gone and she was gone never to be the woman I had known.

It was better this way the monster said.

And I pleaded, asking what was the box for, and it
patiently explained.

It was a music box it said.

Then with a casual cruelty, the creature melted away,
leaving me alone with my memories of her and a sad song
swelling in my head forever.

Long after my own body had decayed.

FLOWERS OF ICE

She was found on a world of ice.

She was this flower, an orchid perhaps, curling glass petals toward the sun which would kill her if she reached half an inch closer to the sky than she did. Fell in love with her almost immediately.

She doesn't speak but I hear her thoughts and though she has no eyes she perceives me as a thing of fire, my body seen through her senses is a burning hail rippling heat outward like the way a bonfire shimmers the air above it.

When she sees me, I no longer look human at all.

When she perceives the snows of an arctic climate I see through her eyes a valley of summertime. When she sees birds skim the air, I see torches with wings sailing a sky so cold as to be a skin of ice.

And when she sees through my eyes her world becomes a frozen finger of white, shattering and breaking citadels of snow, her people which she regards as I regard my people become flowers of glass, delicate as a child's dream.

Though she loves me too we know we could never touch without I burning her to ash or she scalding me to cinders.

Still, I sit in her world of summer though, never moving, always half-dreaming myself a flower of fire and still she sits in my world of winter, never moving, always half-dreaming herself a flower of ice.

MACHINE LOVE STORY

Iron masses worshipping flesh which they created there in those cities of black furnaces. Imagine the shaper's hand, the machine hand carving into skin their image of a creator. What would mankind be neath their eyes though? Nothing human surely. The last man died leaving them behind with nothing to do until a shard of skin was found.

So, they began their labour, having no image, no memory, no voice of the living as guide. But onward they went anyway.

And why?

Do you know what it's like to spend a hundred years with only yourself for company?

Now imagine spending a billion more, seeing only the same face etched upon the forms of each cog moving in their pristine design.

In comparison even a flawed image would be something indescribable, something akin to madness and therefore akin to living and to life, like the way iron dreams as it is forged, and what it is dreaming of when it has cooled.

SEEDS

We carry seeds inside of us now.

Found on a desert planet. Look like small sparrow eggs
colour of moonstone, each no heavier than a snowflake.

Became a delicacy for a time.

Then we found out they won't leave and can't be
destroyed.

On their world, it gets hot enough to melt lead. Seeds
consider it a warm breeze. Cold does nothing either. At night
atmosphere crystalizes, scattering along the ground.

Cutting doesn't work. They just come back together,
crawling to the other pieces of themselves.

And we don't know what will emerge when they ripen.

Considering they are inside millions of us, taking up
residence, impossible to remove, most live in quiet panic.

Some think they will rupture into trees, bodies rooted to
the floors or left impaled upon their beds.

But so far nothing has happened.

Some suspect their life cycle may be hundreds of years
long making them invisible passengers, as harmless as ourselves.

Others think the seeds will pass from mother to child,
somehow, waiting for the perfect day when our grandchildren
will blossom into flowers.

I don't suppose seeds care what any of us think since we
are nothing now but the forests of them, for every tree is nothing
but the memory of a seed, and as we do not know our fates in the
shadows of them they will never be forgotten.

I think we are the forests of them only so long as they
linger in our memories.

CHIMAERA

They do not have war, nor understand what it is to kill. Life evolved there very differently. Instead, the only means of conquest lay in concealment, a leaf revealed to be an insect, a hill revealed to be a titan half-asleep. Everything is something else here you see.

Imagine our surprise to find people there exactly like ourselves, wishing only to be with us always. And they are always so lovely and beautiful, their speech as soft and crystalline as glass instruments touched by the wind, ourselves never realizing they are but marionettes, bright dolls dancing before us with things beneath manipulating them.

And now they or we are giving birth to a new humanity, wombs opening to reveal children exactly like ourselves, though only because we are the strangers here, the jaguars stalking among herds of gazelle, the gazelles wearing the skins of jaguars.

So. When they arrive on Earth what will they become?

In the country of predators, they may grow chrysalislike into the walls of buildings, or perhaps the roads, or perhaps taking on the appearance of the loved and lost, or be any number of things a predator ignores, content to be untouched by our raking claws.

AN ENDLESS EXPANSE

The beach is an endless expanse of sand I'm lying upon and down at my feet are the limits of the ocean and if I slide across the waters, I'd be along the shores of Africa eventually.

It's all a matter of perspective.

The sun is high, I shaded by an umbrella except for my feet which I feel getting warmer as I imagine each skin cell flaking off and turning down imagine my feet dissolving to dust carried off by the wind, portions of myself swimming the atmosphere above other continents or about cities whose names I haven't heard of yet.

I lean back and try to sleep. But for a moment I am confronted by dreams, one dream inside the other, the lattice of themselves connected like nesting dolls as I strain to awake, and I awake.

I turn on my side and see a beetle, a small brown little creature amid grains of sand and suddenly he is amid boulders, moving them titanlike, the whole world this, boulders, sun and shadow, and these beetles crawling across the world.

And I stare down through his eyes a moment and to him I have become mountain, or shadow, or nothing, unglimped, unimagined, and unknown.

I lean back trying to close my eyes, trying to unlearn what I saw up there somewhere in the void when for the barest moment something saw me, something so massive worlds seemed like grains of sand to it, so alien I could not begin to describe it. Then it moved on again, indifferent to my self as I turned and gazed upward at the shade of the umbrella while the beetle continued, struggling amid the boulders of the deep dark world below.

Which is a perfect image to the world that is my own.

MEMENTO MORI

Where do memories go when they go away?

Is there somewhere they crawl when they fall out of us lengthwise, like scars fall and obliterate themselves, some country you can go where you'll find an hour you lived in, country where our memories are shaped like men and women, childhood afternoon taking on the likeness of a little girl or winter storm an old man, cursing the darkness of his eyes?

If there was a land where our memories immigrate to, where yesterday has passport and will find itself standing in some hotel room, waiting for the door to close, then nothing is ever really gone and all we need to do is follow their footsteps back to this city without end, this territory composed once of the countries behind our eyes.

But what if all this is merely behind our eyes? What if this is the only place our memories cling to, each walking slowly to the city's edge and then obliterating themselves in a final step?

No. It would be easier to imagine them crawling away from us to *it* because then at least *it* exists, has weight, is there even if it is a *there* we cannot see but still can hope for, claim last year is only stumbling drunk to his tavern or last summer is simply dancing with some other season, the two blending shape and form together.

Can memories love? Divorced from you would a memory be capable of having some passionate spark apart from you?

I suppose one can only hope. Can a memory hope?

Divorced from you I suppose it's true, that a memory might be capable of hope.

Else otherwise when we are gone, they are gone, taken from off the shores of night and placed in a deeper night, beyond all understanding.

MAYFLY'S WORLD

The world was a silvery tear, a shimmering mass of light and warmth. It was a world of rivers and wide-open plains and forests and there was no sign of anything else resembling life.

Then in the morning, they came.

In a field, the shimmering threads coalesced and suddenly one was confronted by the sound of endless wings, and eyes from countless small beings were seen. The webs were from them and they built in seconds whole towers using tall grasses as scaffolding.

Then they moved onward, forward, some cities expanding outward, grey bodies ruptured, jewel-encrusted eyes watching their own deaths moments after birth. Others became beacons of enlightenment; one could hear the sum total of their wisdom, their myths, legends, and operatic geniuses, all descending to the twilight of extinction in a summer afternoon.

Each one had to find someone and the mad rush through the halls of silvery splendour and the green pillars of the dew-warmed grass made the cities a cacophony of movement, and then, all too suddenly night began to fall and the cities began to languish and by evening they were dead with their children cocooned and ready to start the next generation all over again.

This is how it had always been.

Tranin was watching as night fell. He was the last and he had decided to try to make contact with them. The mayflies, as he called them, lived in the space of seconds. An entire life was so short and each civilization ended at nightfall that trying to make them understand there was a larger universe seemed impossible.

But Tranin didn't believe in impossibilities. In his black uniform, he walked among the ruined wreckage of their city, each

footfall shattering the webs like soft partially melted glass. He then carefully picked up a few eggs using a small robotic device attached to his right rib.

With almost microscopic metallic fingers he pulled at a few of the eggs and carefully laid them in a small compartment on his right hip then walked back to his ship and the ship took off again.

He laid the eggs in a specially created artificial replica of the world below and then got to work. He studied the eggs, each barely a millimeter across. Once day hit, they would hatch then build, then continue to build until night came and they went away again.

But, what if . . . *yes*. The ship was in orbit now. It was like a disk with the replica occupying the central hub, twenty feet around with an invisible wall about the empty plains and tall grasses and the wall presented a holographic representation of a forest beyond itself.

“Let there be light,” he said and the light of the sun shone and the eggs were woken into breathing consciousness.

And they built all that they would build upon the world and he waited. The planet had twenty-six-hour days and he wondered. He read *War of the Worlds*, speaking of invaders, though by this time such concepts were absurd.

He looked over them from time to time, worrying about them. He imagined one of them, even gave her a name. Mara.

He went over and watched as one grey body he selected sped and worked, found a partner, and in her old age waited for the end as patiently as she had waited for everything else in life. And then she died. By now it was the twenty-seventh hour.

But the light was still pouring in and their world had not come to an end. Before as night fell the mayflies would no longer create live young but lay eggs. Now however with the sun still

pouring in, fueling their bodies, they continued to reproduce. He had prevented the loss of an entire civilization just by sustaining light.

It took six days to slowly introduce them to him. As he spoke, they listened. By the second day, they had begun to build using bits of wood. By the third, he had given them a small quantity of metal. Each generation was made aware of and improved upon what had happened before.

By the sixth day, he introduced longevity treatments to them. He could have taken a few individuals and done this, but no, this had to be slow and steady.

Each day he introduced more and more to them.

By the second day not only had he introduced wood but showed them himself. Some were afraid but others learned to find the giant awe-inspiring. By the third, he had not only given them metal but showed them their homeworld and then gave them a small lasting glimpse of the universe beyond.

Now it was the sixth and he asked for one to volunteer, to become immortal, or as immortal as their species could understand. Mara's descendant, how many generations removed from her he could not tell, did so, stepping to the edge of their world as she was bathed in a different form of light.

After that, he took her out into the ship itself. He did more, expanding her form to one capable of interacting with him. Her grey body, mouthless face, glistening lead-coloured eyes were astonishing. She seemed a creature of an older earth, and yet her intelligence was familiar to the man.

They had much to discuss.

He explained why he was here, why communication was so important to them. She listened, understanding the greater universe beyond, understanding the sadness behind the alien's eyes. He had a message to deliver to them and technology that would allow them to continue building upward if they wished it.

He honestly did not know if his coming was a blessing or a curse. He had no answers to that, but in some cases, his species had done uncounted good and in other cases uncounted evil.

But that didn't matter now.

He gave her a message to give to her people, though by now generations had passed and those she knew were dead. After the message he promised to give her the technology to let the sun remain in a tiny portion above their part of the world when he set them back down. They could then spread this technology to the others.

Again, he could not say if this was good or ill, kind or cruel. But the sadness in his eyes told her it was the best that he could offer.

She was returned to her former size, the descendants of those she knew clustered about her as if she was a goddess newly returned and he returned to the world below. The replica was then laid carefully on an unused patch of earth where nothing was, no grass nor trees, a spot he had chosen specifically in the making of what he hoped would be.

And the message was this.

"We were here, we love you, and we will not come again.

"We are gone and we shall not return. The last of us has come to help if he can. We only ask that when it is his time, he may be allowed to be buried here among you. All we have, the best of what we have we offer in friendship.

"Please do not forget us."